

CONTAGIOUS DISEASE AND HURON WOMEN,  
1630-1650

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By  
Jacki Andre  
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## **Abstract**

In the pre-contact era, Huron women were relatively powerful. They were active participants in the political, economic, and cultural activities of pre-contact Huronia. After contact with Europeans, however, epidemic disease swept through the Huron country. As a virgin soil population, the Hurons were devastated by contagious disease. Beginning in 1634, they witnessed epidemic outbreaks of diseases such as measles, scarlet fever, influenza, and smallpox. The epidemics had a harsh physical toll on all Hurons, particularly pregnant and breast-feeding women. The incidence of disease was high and the mortality rate was at least fifty percent. The epidemics also had cultural consequences. As a result of epidemic disease, the Hurons witnessed changes to their political processes, economic activities, cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs. Two of the most significant cultural consequences of contagious disease were warfare with the Five Nations and the loss of faith in traditional beliefs. Each of the cultural changes instigated by contagious disease affected the power and prestige of Huron women. The impact of contagious disease on Huron women was overwhelmingly negative.

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## Preface

Initially, I had a difficult time choosing a topic for my Master's thesis. There are many historical eras and questions that interest me. Additionally, I wanted to work with a topic that I knew only a little about. I wanted my research to be a learning experience.

The genesis of my topic can be traced back to one of my undergraduate classes. During 1992-93, I took Dr. J. R. Miller's seminar class on Indian-White Relations at the University of Saskatchewan. One of the requirements for that class was a research paper which utilized primary documents. I chose to write about the pre-contact medical practices of the Iroquoian and Algonquian nations of the Great Lakes area. The research that I did for that paper brought home to me the extent of contagious disease after contact, and the havoc that disease wreaked on Indigenous society. There were several questions that were raised in my mind when I wrote that paper. One of those questions was, "Did contagious disease affect Indigenous men and women in different ways?"

As I have shown in my thesis, the answer to that question is "yes." Although contagious disease had different consequences for men and women, all Huron people suffered tremendously during the epidemics of the 1630s. Men did not suffer any less than women did. As well, the impact of contagious disease on men is not less important than its impact on women. However, I chose to focus on women for two main reasons. First, in the past, women were underrepresented in historical studies. Now, however, we

realize that a better understanding of the role of women in history will lead to a better understanding of history in general.

The second reason I chose to focus on women is the socio-economic status of Indigenous Canadian women today. It is widely accepted that Indigenous women occupy one of the lowest rungs on Canada's socio-economic ladder. Yet, in pre-contact times, some Indigenous women, such as the Hurons, enjoyed relatively egalitarian positions in their societies. I wanted to examine the reasons for the loss of power and prestige that Indigenous women endured. Some scholars, such as Karen Lee Anderson and Carol Devens, argue that Christianity diminished the power and prestige of many Indigenous women. I agree. However, I wondered why Indigenous women accepted Christianity and allowed new beliefs to diminish their power and prestige. Clearly, Christianity alone was not responsible for Indigenous women's loss of power. There were other factors involved, one of which was contagious disease.

My focus was more narrow than just women, and even more narrow than Indigenous women. I limited my research to Huron women during the 1630s and 1640s. The main reason I chose to study Huron women is the relative wealth of primary sources which concern them. Additionally, there are primary documents that describe Huron society after contact but before outbreaks of epidemic disease. Some of those documents also follow the Hurons through the epidemics. This information is invaluable because once epidemic disease touched Native societies, those societies witnessed tremendous change. But unless information on pre-epidemic life is available, the changes that occurred are not always noticeable. Finally, Huron and other Iroquoian women had relatively egalitarian positions in their societies,

which makes their loss of power and prestige noticeable and dramatic.

In my thesis, I challenge some of the traditional historical interpretations of the role of Indigenous women during the contact period. Instead of pointing to the fur trade and Christianity as the impetus for women's loss of power and prestige, I point to epidemic disease. Yes, changes to the economy and to Indigenous belief systems decreased women's traditional power. However, if epidemic disease had not claimed thousands of lives and caused social upheaval, Indigenous people would not have accepted the changes as quickly or as easily. Had contagious disease not been a factor, the story of Indigenous women during the contact period would be completely different.

## **Introduction**

According to Huron mythology, the first human being on earth was Aataentsic, the mother of all people. Prior to her descent to earth, Aataentsic lived and worked in the heavens. One day, Aataentsic's husband became ill, but he dreamed that his health would return if he ate the fruit of a certain tree. Anxious to fulfill her husband's dream, Aataentsic found the fruit tree and tried to chop it down. However, the tree split in two and fell through a hole in the sky. Amazed, Aataentsic threw herself into the hole. As she was falling, a turtle happened to look up and see her descending toward the earth. This female turtle was quite surprised, and at first was uncertain what to do. The turtle called a general assembly of all the aquatic animals. After deliberating among themselves, the animals decided to follow the advice of the turtle. Under her guidance, the other animals dove to the bottom of the ocean, where they gathered soil to place on the turtle's back. Gradually, through the perseverance of the animals, the ocean receded, and the earth was built on the back of the turtle.

Aataentsic was pregnant when she landed on the turtle's back, and she soon gave birth to a daughter. In time, although there were no men on earth, Aataentsic's daughter gave birth to twin sons. The two boys, Tawiscaron and Iouskeha, quarreled bitterly one day. The argument escalated and each of the brothers armed himself. Iouskeha chose the horns of a stag as his weapon, while Tawiscaron chose the fruit of the wild rosebush. When Iouskeha hit his brother with the horns, Tawiscaron was severely wounded

and bled profusely. Hoping to escape, Tawiscaron fled, sprinkling his blood over the earth. The blood which Tawiscaron lost gave its colour to flint, the stone used by Hurons to make tools. Iouskeha chased his brother, and, in the end, killed him.<sup>1</sup>

Together, Aataentsic and Iouskeha governed the world. Grandmother and grandson each had complementary duties. Iouskeha was in charge of "the living and all things that concern life."<sup>2</sup> Although Aataentsic was the mother of humankind, she, nevertheless, "was of a very evil nature; she subsisted only on the flesh of serpents and vipers; she presided at death; she likewise sucked the blood of men, causing them to die of illness and weakness."<sup>3</sup>

The story of Aataentsic clearly delineated and propagated the power and prestige women held in Huron society. Aataentsic was responsible for all life and all death. Women, represented by Aataentsic, her daughter, and the female turtle, had a great deal of influence in Huron society. Initially, the earth was created for a woman under the guidance of a female turtle. The turtle in the story has a great deal of power; she not only calls a general council of all the aquatic animals, but she also makes a unilateral decision, which all the other animals respect and obey. The turtle is revered as the grandmother of the Hurons, "who physically and spiritually sustains [the]

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<sup>1</sup> Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, 73 volumes (New York: Pageant, 1959), 10:127-9; Bruce G. Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660*, reprint (Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), 78.

<sup>2</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 8:117.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph-François Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Tribes*, William N. Fenton and Elizabeth L. Moore, eds., 2 volumes (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1974), 1:168.

Great Island, America."<sup>4</sup> In the Huron creation myth, women also have a great deal of control over procreation and child-rearing activities. Alone on earth, Aataentsic gives birth and cares for her daughter. Once grown, Aataentsic's daughter also becomes pregnant in a world where no men reside. The importance of women's fecundity is underscored by the myth's imagery. Historian Natalie Zemon Davis likens the picture of Aataentsic falling through the hole in the sky to a "birth-canal-like image."<sup>5</sup> In the creation story of the Hurons, men have little influence over the creation of either the world or humankind.

The story of Aataentsic is an invaluable tool for understanding the role of women in Huron society. This story reveals the Hurons' perception of women in a way that no other source is able to do. Very little of the Hurons' own myths, legends, or history is documented. Because they were a non-literate people, the Hurons passed their history from generation to generation through oral traditions. Older Hurons told young people the stories they had learned, "regarding their ancestors . . . so that the young people, who [were] present and hear[d] them, [could] preserve the memory thereof, and relate them in their turn . . ."<sup>6</sup> Although the Hurons left no written records of their lives and history, pieces of their story are revealed in many sources. Through primary and secondary historical material, as well as through works from other academic disciplines, an understanding of Huron life, both before and after contact, emerges.

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<sup>4</sup> Georges E. Sioui, *Les Wendats: Une Civilisation Méconnue* (St. Foy, Quebec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1994), dedication, n.p. My translation.

<sup>5</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 139.

<sup>6</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 30:61.

The best primary source concerning Huron life after sustained European contact is the *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*. The *Relations* are a seventy-three volume collection of papers written by the Jesuits during their stay in New France. Spanning a period of 181 years (1610-1791), the *Relations* provide helpful material about many Indigenous North American people and cultures. The writings of the Jesuits also contain invaluable information about contagious disease among Indigenous nations, particularly the Hurons. The records concerning the Hurons begin in 1626, the year the Jesuits first arrived in Huronia. According to historical sources, the first epidemic arrived in Huronia in 1636--a decade after the arrival of the Jesuits. Therefore, the Huron society initially seen by the Jesuits was a society untouched by contagious disease. When the epidemics broke out, the Jesuits witnessed first-hand the responses of the Hurons to contagious disease. Although the Jesuits established missions among other Indigenous nations, those missions were often established after outbreaks of contagious disease, and, as a result, after societal changes had already taken place. For this reason, the experiences of the Hurons, as recorded by the Jesuits, are quite valuable.

Granted, the *Relations* are far from objective. Originally, the *Relations* were written to garner interest in the Jesuit missions in New France. The Jesuits hoped that an increased awareness of their work would result in larger monetary donations to support the missions.<sup>7</sup> Because the Jesuits were requesting money to convert Native Canadian people to Christianity, they stressed the "paganism" of the Amerindians to the point of

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<sup>7</sup> John Webster Grant, *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter since 1534* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 6, 31.



exaggeration.<sup>8</sup> There are other problems within the *Relations* that the reader must also keep in mind. For example, the Jesuits' beliefs concerning sexuality, morality, social and familial organization, political authority, property ownership, and women's roles in society were vastly different from the beliefs of the Hurons and other Indigenous people. Yet, the Jesuits unwaveringly believed that their beliefs were superior to those of the Amerindians. Another problem with the *Relations* is that the Jesuits saw Indigenous women as:

the major impediment to the conversion of Hurons to Christianity, and [women] were therefore, presented in an unfavourable light. Women, too, were viewed as inferior to men, and the Jesuits steadfastly refused to acknowledge their social, political, and economic power.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the drawbacks, however, the *Relations* remain the best primary source regarding the relationship between Europeans and Native Americans in seventeenth-century New France. As the historian John Webster Grant puts it, the *Relations* "maintain an admirable level of frankness and allow us to see the missions, if not with complete objectivity, at least much as the missionaries saw them."<sup>10</sup>

There is other useful primary material which concerns the Hurons. Specifically, Gabriel Sagard's *Le Grand Voyage du Pays des Hurons* is an excellent source dedicated almost exclusively to the examination of Huron people and culture. Sagard was a lay brother with the Recollet mission to

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<sup>8</sup> Denys Del  ge, *Bitter Feast: Amerindians and Europeans in Northeastern North America, 1600-64*, Jane Brierley, trans. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1993), 48.

<sup>9</sup> Karen Lee Anderson, "Huron Women and Huron Men: The Effects of Demography, Kinship, and the Social Division of Labour on Male/Female Relations among the Seventeenth-Century Huron," (Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Toronto, 1983), 29.

<sup>10</sup> Grant, *Moon*, 31.

the Hurons in the winter of 1623-4. Although he only lived among the Hurons for ten months, his work contains a great deal of valuable information.

Another good source which examines the Hurons is Joseph-François Lafitau's *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Tribes*. Lafitau was a Jesuit missionary who resided among the Mohawks at Caughnawaga from 1712 to 1717. Unfortunately, Lafitau first published his work in 1724, seventy-five years after the dispersal of the Huron Confederacy.<sup>11</sup> However, Lafitau's volumes are useful because they show how that Hurons adapted to the dispersal of their country. The books also contain a wealth of information regarding the customs of the member tribes of the Five Nations. When studying the Hurons, a comparison between the Hurons and the Five Nations tribes is necessary for a number of reasons. First, the Hurons were part of the Iroquoian linguistic group in north-east North America. Other Iroquoian groups included the Five Nations (Mohawks, Senecas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Oneidas), the Neutrals, and the Petuns.<sup>12</sup> The languages of these nations were only somewhat similar to each other. However, the nations shared many of the same beliefs and customs.<sup>13</sup> For example, the creation myth of the Onondagas is quite similar to that of the Hurons. The Onondagas believed that the earth was peopled when a pregnant woman was pushed through a hole in the sky by her

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<sup>11</sup> Lafitau, *Customs*, 1:n.p. The Huron Confederacy was dispersed in 1649 because of a number of reasons, primarily disease and warfare. The dispersal will be discussed more fully in Chapter Six.

<sup>12</sup> J. R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 21:193. The Hurons called the Neutrals "Attiwandaronk," which meant, "people of a slightly different language."

husband.<sup>14</sup> A second reason why a comparison between the Hurons and other Iroquoian groups is necessary is the circumstances surrounding the dispersal of the Hurons in 1649. Not only was the dispersal largely due to warfare with the Five Nations, but following the break-up of the Huron Confederacy, many Hurons went to live among Five Nations groups. For these reasons, Lafitau's work, as well as other studies which deal with the Five Nations, are useful when studying the Hurons.

There are a number of other primary sources which shed light on the history of the Hurons. Samuel de Champlain's *Voyages*, and Marie de l'Incarnation's *Letters* are both helpful. Two short works written by Dutch men, Harmen Meynderts Van den Bogaert's *Journey into Mohawk and Oneida Country*, and Adriaen Van der Donck's *Description of the New Netherlands* are good sources for information on the Five Nations, especially the Mohawks.

This thesis is an attempt to reveal the impact of contagious disease on Huron women. Contagious diseases affected Huron society as a whole, and they had a tremendously harsh and negative effect on women. Primary sources reveal only fragments of the story. Part of the problem is that contemporary Europeans had little understanding of contagious disease or the havoc it wreaked on Indigenous society. As well, those Europeans were, for the most part, men, who did not fully understand the contributions Indigenous women made to their societies. As a result, secondary sources are invaluable. There are many secondary sources which may be consulted for a study of disease among the Hurons. Naturally, historical works concerning New France in the seventeenth century, Native Canadians and

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 42:149.

their relationship with Europeans, and medical history are necessary. Additionally, however, studies from other academic disciplines are indispensable. A good understanding of the impact of contagious disease on Huron women would not be possible without consulting academic fields such as anthropology, archaeology, sociology, medicine, psychology, or religious studies. Even through extensive research, however, a study of the ramifications of contagious disease on Huron women remains somewhat fragmentary. Unfortunately, the historical record is not complete enough to allow a full understanding of the topic. However, contagious disease had a tremendous effect on Huron and other Native Canadian women. Therefore, even a partial understanding of the impact of contagious disease sheds a great deal of light on the status of Huron women in both the pre-contact and contact eras.

Epidemic disease had devastating consequences for all Indigenous people in North America. Prior to the arrival of European explorers and settlers, contagious diseases were rare among Indigenous Americans.<sup>15</sup> The widespread sickness and death that accompanied Europeans affected every aspect of Indigenous life. Most apparent was the rampant mortality of Native people and the concomitant resettlement (in some cases, dispersal) of villages or entire nations. More subtly, contagious disease also affected Indigenous political organization, medical practices, burial customs, and religious beliefs.

Every Indigenous American person was subjected to the ravaging effects of contagious disease. Those fortunate enough to survive had to cope

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<sup>15</sup> Adriaen Van der Donck, *A Description of the New Netherlands*, Thomas F. O'Donnell, ed. (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1968), 72.

with the psychological effects of losing loved ones, as well as political, economic, and cultural upheaval. Indigenous men suffered no less than Indigenous women. The loss and societal changes that Native men endured should not be disregarded. However, epidemic disease often affected Indigenous women quite differently than Indigenous men.

Native American women, and especially Iroquoian women, enjoyed a relatively egalitarian position in their societies. Iroquoian belief stresses that, the place of humans in the Circle [of Life] is not more or less important than that of other forms of life; all are free and equal: men, women, animals, plants, minerals, air, the sun, land, fire, stars, spirits: in a word, the Creation.<sup>16</sup>

In comparison, the seventeenth century ushered in an era of increasing subordination for European women.<sup>17</sup> However, Iroquoian women of the 1600s had extensive influence in their societies. Much of the power of Iroquoian women was linked to their control of agricultural production. Corn, in particular, was important to Iroquoian society. Maize was the single most important source of food in the St. Lawrence lowlands.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, surplus stores of corn were traded to northern Algonquians in exchange for hunted meat and furs.<sup>19</sup> The bulk of agricultural labour was expended by women. The huge contributions of women to the survival and economy of Huronia gave women a correspondingly large amount of influence and freedom.

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<sup>16</sup> Sioui, *Wendats*, 224-5

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Conrad Heidenreich, *Huronia: A History and Geography of the Huron Indians, 1600-1650* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), 163.

<sup>19</sup> Samuel de Champlain, *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain, 1604-1618*, W. L. Grant, ed. (New York: Scribner, 1907), 317.

Politically, Huron women had no direct power; they could not hold political office. However, because Huron society was matrilineal and matrilocal, women controlled the selection of male chiefs. Through their control of the food supply and residence patterns, women could influence men to accept women's decisions.<sup>20</sup> The economic power, like the political power of Huron women was considerable, but indirect. Huron women did not participate in trade negotiations. Nevertheless, they controlled the main source of barter--corn. Through their control of the corn supply, women wielded influence in Huronia's economy. Socially, women in the Huron country did not have much direct influence. However, they had many privileges that contemporary European women did not have. Huron women participated freely in premarital sex, and they chose their own sexual partners and husbands.<sup>21</sup> The women of Huronia also practiced birth control, and easily obtained abortions.<sup>22</sup> As well, Huron women could aspire to the office of shaman.<sup>23</sup> Indigenous shamans were more than religious practitioners or healers. Through the office of shaman, Huron women influenced social and political policies. Compared to other seventeenth-century women, Huron and other Iroquoian women were relatively powerful.

Contagious disease, however, affected every aspect of Huron women's lives. During widespread attacks of contagious disease, women were unable to cultivate their fields.<sup>24</sup> As a result, women's economic influence waned. Contagious disease also affected women's political power. Because the

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<sup>20</sup> Anderson, "Huron Women," 66-7.

<sup>21</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 23:165; Champlain, *Voyages*, 319-20.

<sup>22</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 13:105-7.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:125; 13:37-9.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 27:65.

epidemics claimed the lives of many men, Huron women lost the privilege of choosing chiefs. Instead of selecting the most suitable man as chief, Hurons had to make do with whoever was alive and well.<sup>25</sup> Socially, contagious disease provoked a number of changes. Many of the activities that pre-contact Huron women participated in were eliminated or altered by the devastating effects of disease. Physically, Huron women suffered greatly during epidemics. In addition to physical illness and high mortality rates, contagious disease was often accompanied by temporary infertility, stillbirths, and the cessation of lactation. Psychologically, Huron women were demoralized by the large-scale epidemic death. Some Hurons committed suicide in the midst of epidemic disease.<sup>26</sup> Others turned to Christianity. The seventeenth-century Roman Catholic Church still believed St. Thomas Aquinas's statement that, "woman is naturally subject to man, because in man, the discretion of reason predominates."<sup>27</sup> Huron women were not exempt from the sexist attitudes of the Church. It is clear that contagious disease had enormous and wide-ranging ramifications for Huron and other Indigenous American women.

In pre-contact times, Huron and other Iroquoian women enjoyed a relatively egalitarian position in their societies. Women had influence in the economic, political, and social spheres of Huronia. The myth of Aataentsic reflects the position of women in the Huron country. Like the turtle in the story, Huron women were able to influence the course of their lives and their

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 15:43.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:27; 18:29.

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Karen Lee Anderson, "As Gentle as Little Lambs: Images of Huron and Montagnais-Naskapi Women in the Writings of the 17th Century Jesuits," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 25, no. 4 (November 1988), 562.

nation. Like Aataentsic, Huron women were responsible for life, from birth until death. The contagious disease introduced by the European explorers and settlers, however, had tremendous repercussions for Huron women. While women did not necessarily suffer more than men, epidemic disease affected the men and women of Huronia differently. To understand the position of women in pre-contact and contact Huronia, the impact of contagious disease must be studied as fully as possible.



## Chapter One

### Hurononia in the Pre-Contact Era

The first direct contact between Europeans and Hurons occurred in 1609. While exploring, Champlain was approached by a group of Algonquins and Hurons, who asked him to help in their warfare with the Five Nations. Although Champlain was willing to aid the Indigenous warriors, the Native men could not reach a consensus concerning the method of war. As a result, the Indigenous party broke up, and the Hurons returned to their country.<sup>1</sup>

Although the Hurons did not meet any Europeans prior to 1609, the people of Hurononia knew of the existence of Europeans. Additionally, before contact, second-hand European trade goods arrived in the Huron country, via their Algonquian neighbors.<sup>2</sup> Even before direct contact was established with Europeans, Huron society was subjected to European influence. Historian James Axtell explains the impact Europeans had on Indigenous people immediately prior to direct contact: "Before they actually met any Europeans, many tribes encountered often fabulous stories of white 'gods' or 'spirits,' [and] some of the products of their awesome technology . . ."<sup>3</sup> In the pre-contact era, the influence of Europeans and their trade goods in Hurononia was small. As anthropologist Bruce Trigger argues, the amount and quality

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel de Champlain, *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain, 1604-1618*, W. L. Grant, ed. (New York: Scribner, 1907), 151, 154.

<sup>2</sup> Conrad Heidenreich, *Hurononia: A History and Geography of the Huron Indians, 1600-1650* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), 49.

<sup>3</sup> James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Conquest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 283.

of European goods in Huronia prior to 1609 probably did not have a great impact on Huron society.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the European presence in Huronia was palpable.

Although the Hurons are often referred to as a single nation, they were actually a confederacy of four distinct tribes. The Hurons called themselves *Wendat*. Translated, *Wendat* may mean either "The One Language," "The One Land Apart," or "The One Island." Geographer Conrad Heidenreich argues that the last two translations are likely closer to the original Huron meaning than "The One Language." In *Huron: A History and Geography of the Huron Indians*, Heidenreich states that the Huron country was almost completely surrounded by water.<sup>5</sup> Trigger argues that the Hurons may have also believed themselves to be living on an island due to their mythology. After all, the world of the Hurons was essentially an island built on the back of a turtle.<sup>6</sup> It is entirely plausible that the Hurons thought of themselves as living on an island or on an land apart.

It was the French who first referred to the *Wendat* as "Hurons." The bristly hair styles worn by *Wendat* men supposedly reminded French sailors of a boar's head. In French, the word *hure* means, "boar's head;" hence, a corruption of *hure* was applied to all the members of the *Wendat* Confederacy. However, Trigger also maintains that *huron* was used for many years in the Old World in reference to ruffians or rustics. Regardless

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce G. Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660*, reprint (Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), 243.

<sup>5</sup> Heidenreich, *Huron*, 21-2.

<sup>6</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 27.

of its etymology, however, "Huron" was usually used by seventeenth-century Europeans to refer to the *Wendats*.<sup>7</sup>

Originally, the Huron Confederacy was composed of two member nations, the Attignawantan and the Attigneenongnahac. For approximately two hundred years prior to contact, the Attignawantan and the Attigneenongnahac lived together in the region referred to as Huronia. These two groups, which called each other "brother" and "sister," were joined by two more nations shortly before the arrival of the Europeans. Around 1590, the Arendahronon joined the Huron Confederacy, and the Tohontaenrat joined about 1610.<sup>8</sup> There is some speculation that either the Arendahronon or the Tohontaenrat were composed mainly of members of the St. Lawrence Iroquoians.<sup>9</sup> The people known as the St. Lawrence Iroquoians made contact with French explorer Jacques Cartier during his visits in the 1530s, but by the early seventeenth century they had vanished.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of who these newcomers were, however, their arrival in Huronia caused a great deal of sociocultural change. The absorption of the Arendahronons and the Tahontaenrats into the Huron Confederacy was accompanied by a relocation of existing villages and a realignment of clan segments. As well, the denser population resulted in the Hurons' increasing dependence on trade with northern tribes, such as the Algonquians. The larger Huron population could

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Elisabeth Tooker, *An Ethnography of the Huron Indians, 1615-1649*, reprint (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 10.

<sup>9</sup> Axtell, *Invasion Within*, 43.

<sup>10</sup> J. R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 7.

no longer rely on the scanty game resources in Huronia to fulfill its need for fresh meat and furs.<sup>11</sup>

The Huron country was located in present-day southern Ontario on the southeastern corner of Georgian Bay. Huronia was relatively small--not "more than 35 miles east to west and 20 miles north to south."<sup>12</sup> Approximately eighteen to twenty-five villages were maintained within the boundaries of the Huron country.<sup>13</sup> The number of people living in Huronia at the time of initial contact with Europeans is strenuously debated among scholars. The first Europeans to contact the Hurons estimated the population of the Confederacy at thirty to forty thousand people. Champlain, who wintered among the Hurons in 1615-16, estimated the Huron population at two thousand warriors plus "perhaps thirty thousand souls." Champlain further commented that,

[t]he small tract of [Huron] country which I visited is thickly settled with a countless number of human beings, not to speak of the other districts where I did not go, and which, according to general report, are as thickly settled or more so than those mentioned above.<sup>14</sup>

Sagard, who wintered among the Hurons eight years after Champlain, estimated the population of Huronia at thirty to forty thousand people.<sup>15</sup> The

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<sup>11</sup> Bruce G. Trigger, "The Road to Affluence: A Reassessment of Early Huron Responses to European Contact," in Richard F. Salisbury and Elisabeth Tooker, eds., *Affluence and Cultural Survival* (Washington: American Ethnological Society, 1984), 13, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 27-30.

<sup>13</sup> Champlain, *Voyages*, 313. Champlain states that there were eighteen villages. Gabriel Sagard, *Le Grand Voyage du Pays des Hurons* (Quebec: Bibliothèque Québécoise, 1990), 161. Sagard writes that there were twenty-five towns. Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, 73 volumes, (New York: Pagan, 1959), 10:313. The Jesuits recorded that there were twenty towns.

<sup>14</sup> Champlain, *Voyages*, 285, 313.

<sup>15</sup> Sagard, *Grand Voyage*, 161.

writers of the *Relations* supported the figures of both Champlain and Sagard, estimating the Huron population at thirty to thirty-five thousand.<sup>16</sup>

Scholars of Huronia, however, tend to disagree with the contemporary estimates made by Europeans. Heidenreich, for example, theorizes that the maximum pre-epidemic population of Huronia was 21,000.<sup>17</sup> Trigger calculates a maximum pre-epidemic population figure for Huronia of 23,500. To achieve his estimate, Trigger relies on the 1640 post-epidemic census of Huronia made by the Jesuits. It must be kept in mind, however, that this census included the Petuns as well as the Hurons. In the 1640 census, the Jesuits counted 2,000 hearths within the boundaries of the Huron country. In *Natives and Newcomers*, Trigger states that since each hearth supported two families, and since each family was composed of five to eight members prior to the devastating epidemics of the 1630s, the Huron population numbered 19,500 in 1639. Taking into consideration a 20 per cent mortality rate for the epidemics of the 1630s, Trigger arrives at his pre-epidemic population estimate of 23,500 for Huronia.<sup>18</sup>

Trigger's estimate of Huronia's pre-contact population differs from contemporary estimates by as much as 41 per cent. There are several points of contention with Trigger's theory. First, Trigger refuses to accept the Jesuits' population estimate of Huronia at thirty to thirty-five thousand people, but he does not question the 1640 census figures at all. Second, Trigger does not take into account that the number of hearths in 1640 may

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<sup>16</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*. See, for example, 6:59 (30,000); 10:313 (30,000); 40:223 (30-35,000); 42:221 ("fully 30,000").

<sup>17</sup> Heidenreich, *Huronia*, 103.

<sup>18</sup> Bruce G. Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers: Canada's "Heroic Age" Reconsidered*, reprint (Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), 234.

have been reduced during the 1630 epidemics. When both parents of a single family died, their young children were often sent to live with their relatives. Additionally, villages with very high mortality rates often relocated, sometimes merging with the remnants of other villages, after an outbreak of contagious disease subsided.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, it is logical to assume that the number of hearths (and not only the number of people) decreased between 1630 and 1640. Third, Trigger appears to assume that the Huron population reached its nadir around 1630. Trigger does admit that epidemics of contagious disease may have reached Huronia as early as 1611.<sup>20</sup> As scholar Georges E. Sioui argues, epidemic disease often preceded contact between Indigenous Americans and Europeans. Further, the first recorded epidemic in the Huron country occurred in 1634 when the Jesuits returned to Huronia after a five-year absence. Because the Jesuits carried an epidemic to Huronia in 1634, it seems highly probable that other contagious diseases accompanied Europeans to the Huron country prior to 1634.<sup>21</sup> Although Trigger admits that contagious disease probably reached Huronia before the 1634 epidemic, he does not examine this idea fully by offering alternative population estimates. Fourth, and most important, an estimated 20 per cent mortality rate in Huronia during the 1630 epidemics seems too small.

There are a number of scholars who suggest that Indigenous population losses due to epidemic disease may range as high as 95 per cent. Archaeologist Ann Ramenofsky endorses this extraordinarily high figure, while cautioning that "infectious diseases . . . reached regional groups

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<sup>19</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 16:59; 26:227.

<sup>20</sup> Trigger, *Newcomers*, 235.

<sup>21</sup> Georges E. Sioui, *Les Wendats: Une Civilisation Méconnue* (St. Foy, Quebec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1994), 168, 170.

decades, if not centuries, prior to historical documentation."<sup>22</sup> Ramenofsky's warning indubitably pertains to the 1640 census of Huronia, which was taken almost thirty years after sustained contact was established between Europeans and Hurons. Archaeologist Susan Johnston states that each epidemic among the Hurons must be studied individually. She finds a 20 per cent mortality rate for the 1634-5 measles epidemic alone. Johnston also stresses that epidemic disease was not the only factor contributing to Huron mortality. The interruption of subsistence activities caused large-scale famine. Additionally, there were probably not enough care-givers to provide adequate amounts of water for the sick, or even to add kindling to all the fires. The mortality rate among the Hurons during the epidemics was affected by more than the diseases themselves.<sup>23</sup> For these reasons, the contemporary estimates made by Champlain, Sagard, and the Jesuits seem reasonable.

The large number of people living within the boundaries of Huronia necessitated a reliance on agriculture as the main source of food. Fish and hunted meat were too scarce to maintain the densely settled population in the Huron country. Reliance on horticulture had a long tradition in the St. Lawrence lowlands. The Iroquoian peoples living in this area, including the Hurons, became sedentary horticulturists between AD 500 and AD 1000.<sup>24</sup> A number of agricultural products were cultivated by the Hurons, including

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<sup>22</sup> Ann Felice Ramenofsky, *Vectors of Death: The Archaeology of European Contact* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 1.

<sup>23</sup> Susan Johnston, "Epidemics: The Forgotten Factor in Seventeenth Century Native Warfare in the St. Lawrence Region," in Bruce Alden Cox, ed., *Native People, Native Lands: Canadian Indians, Inuit, and Metis* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1988), 17, 21.

<sup>24</sup> Karen Lee Anderson, *Chain Her by One Foot: The Subjugation of Women in Seventeenth-Century New France* (London: Routledge, 1991), 104.

sunflowers, squash, and beans. However, "[t]he grain which they sow is maize . . . It is the basis of the food of almost all the sedentary nations from one end of America to the other."<sup>25</sup> Corn was the most important foodstuff in the Huron country.<sup>26</sup> Heidenreich estimates that corn provided 65 per cent of a Huron's daily caloric intake. By comparison, hunted meat provided just six per cent and fish provided nine per cent.<sup>27</sup> Trigger calculates that the cultivation of 7,000 acres of corn would have provided enough maize to feed the entire Huron population at any given time.<sup>28</sup> However, the Hurons regularly cultivated an excess amount of corn. One reason the Hurons grew a surplus of corn was to provide protection against times of famine. The Jesuits noted that the Hurons "cultivate the land in earnest. It thus happens that they have stores of Indian corn, and do not die of starvation like those [Montagnais] here."<sup>29</sup> Another reason the Hurons cultivated a surplus of corn was its use as a trading commodity. Trigger speculates that some northern Algonquian tribes may have been dependent on Huron corn in pre-contact times.<sup>30</sup> Certainly, by 1635, the Jesuits reported that Huronia was "the granary of most of the Algonquians."<sup>31</sup> Once the fur trade with Europeans was established and furs became increasingly important as trade items, groups such as the Algonquins spent more time hunting and

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<sup>25</sup> Joseph-François Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Tribes*, William N. Fenton and Elizabeth L. Moore, eds., 2 volumes (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1974), 2:47.

<sup>26</sup> Champlain, *Voyages*, 284.

<sup>27</sup> Heidenreich, *Huronia*, 163. Heidenreich argues that the remaining 20 per cent of a Huron's daily caloric consisted of: 13 per cent, beans; 5 per cent, gathered fruits; and 2 per cent, squash.

<sup>28</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 36.

<sup>29</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 4:195.

<sup>30</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 353.

<sup>31</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 8:115.



correspondingly less time producing food. After contact, fur-producing tribes became increasingly dependent on Huron corn as a means of survival. In fact, after 1620, the Nipissings preferred to exchange their furs for Huron corn rather than trade directly with the French.<sup>32</sup>

Corn production in Huronia was almost exclusively in the hands of women. Men were crucial to the initial stages of production because they cleared the fields. As Trigger points out in *The Children of Aataentsic*, clearing fields was a time-consuming job. The Hurons did not rotate their crops, nor did they use fertilizers. Soil fertility was quickly depleted, and to maintain the necessary crop yield, new land had to be cleared on a yearly basis.<sup>33</sup>

Once the land was cleared, women cleaned it of debris and sowed the corn and other vegetables. If Huron women followed the same planting schedule as other Iroquoian groups, they would have begun their field work, "the moment that the snows were melted." It is presumed that Huron women, like other Iroquoian women, helped each other in their fields, although each woman was responsible for her own plot of land and its resulting corn yield.<sup>34</sup> Before sowing the corn, women sorted the kernels and soaked them in water for several days.<sup>35</sup> Following the planting, Huron women were kept busy all summer weeding their fields and chasing away birds and animals.<sup>36</sup> Corn matured in Huronia in approximately three to four

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<sup>32</sup> Denys Del  ge, *Bitter Feast: Amerindians and Europeans in Northeastern North America, 1600-64*, Jane Brierley, trans. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1993), 121.

<sup>33</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 40.

<sup>34</sup> Lafitau, *Customs*, 2:54-5.

<sup>35</sup> Sagard, *Grand Voyage*, 175.

<sup>36</sup> Heidenreich, *Huronia*, 178.

months. After harvesting the mature corn, Huron women tied the cobs together by the dried husks and hung the cobs from the roofs of their cabins. Once the corn was sufficiently dried, the women took down the cobs, cleaned and shelled the corn, and stored it in large storage containers, which were placed in the corners of cabins or buried outside the longhouses.<sup>37</sup>

The tremendous amount of work that Huron women contributed to corn production gave them a relatively large amount of influence in their families and their communities. For example, Huron women, like other horticultural Iroquoian women, determined when their villages relocated to new sites. Each village in the Huron country was relocated every ten to twelve years. Because the Hurons regularly cleared new land, the distance between the villages and the fields became inconvenient to travel on a daily basis. Concomitantly, the clearing of land resulted in an increasingly large distance women had to travel for wood. Therefore, "after a certain number of years, [the women could] no longer keep up the work of carrying the wood on their shoulders so far." Once the fields and wood supply became too distant for women to reach easily, entire villages were relocated to ease the workload of women.<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, through their control of corn production, women could indirectly control Huron warriors. Dried corn was the main source of food for traveling Hurons. Sociologist Karen Lee Anderson speculates that Huron women only had to withhold corn in order to prevent Huron men from participating in raids: "[w]omen's participation, it would seem, could make or break men's plans for warring." The control Huron women had over the

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<sup>37</sup> Sagard, *Grand Voyage*, 176.

<sup>38</sup> Lafitau, *Customs*, 2:69-70

corn supply also allowed them a certain amount of control over the Huron economy. There is no evidence that Huron women directly participated in trading negotiations.<sup>39</sup> However, trade with other nations was only possible if women regularly produced a surplus of corn.<sup>40</sup>

Women also wielded a great amount of control in Huronia's social sphere. As Anderson writes, "Huron women occupied an extraordinarily undominated position relative to that of men."<sup>41</sup> In terms of sexuality, for instance, women were free to initiate pre-marital sex, to choose their sexual partners and husbands, and to initiate divorce. As Del  ge points out,

[t]raditionally, sexuality in Huronia was not relegated merely to the function of reproduction. Sensual pleasure was clearly a factor in the sexual freedom of young people, the free choice of spouses, and the place accorded sexuality in festivals and carnivals.<sup>42</sup>

Because sexuality was an important part of Huron society, the freedom inherent in sexual relations was a significant indication of women's social power.

Much of the power that Huron women had was directly attributable to the amount of hard work they contributed to their families and to society as a whole. Besides being almost exclusively in control of agricultural production, Huron women also worked hard at a variety of tasks. The women of Huronia did housework; collected and carried firewood; made

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<sup>39</sup> Anderson, *Chain Her*, 190, 142.

<sup>40</sup> Del  ge, *Bitter Feast*, 69.

<sup>41</sup> Karen Lee Anderson, "Huron Women and Huron Men: The Effects of Demography, Kinship, and the Social Division of Labour on Male/Female Relations among the Seventeenth-Century Huron" (Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Toronto, 1983), thesis abstract, n. p.

<sup>42</sup> Del  ge, *Bitter Feast*, 201.

pottery for cooking and as storage vessels; and wove mats, which were used to sit on as well as to cover the doorways of longhouses in the wintertime. Additionally, Huron women gathered hemp (which was woven into rope), and created a number of decorative accessories, such as tobacco pouches, sashes, bracelets, and necklaces.<sup>43</sup> In comparison, the men of Huronia cleared fields; built longhouses; made canoes, tools, and weapons; held political offices; and were responsible for trade, warfare, and defense.<sup>44</sup> Although the hunt and the fishery were traditionally spheres of men's work, women often accompanied men of hunting and fishing expeditions to help prepare and transport the products back to their villages.<sup>45</sup>

Huron women, like many other Indigenous Canadian women, worked excruciatingly hard. After contact, European men were shocked by the amount of labour the Native women of the St. Lawrence lowlands contributed to their societies. The Jesuits believed the "duties and position [of Algonquin women] are those of slaves, labo[u]rers and beasts of burden."<sup>46</sup> Yet, the work done by the women of the St. Lawrence lowlands was not much more strenuous than that done by seventeenth-century European women. As Davis points out, Marie de l'Incarnation, Mother Superior of the Ursulines in New France, believed that the hard work performed by the Native women of the St. Lawrence region was "simply a given."<sup>47</sup> Likewise, Mary Jemison, a white American woman who lived

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<sup>43</sup> Sagard, *Grand Voyage*, 161-2, 172-3; Thwaites, *Relations*, 9:253-5.

<sup>44</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 40-45.

<sup>45</sup> Heidenreich, *Huronia*, 205.

<sup>46</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 1:257.

<sup>47</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 88.

most of her life among the Senecas, thought that Native women probably did not work any harder than white American women.<sup>48</sup>

Although seventeenth-century European and St. Lawrence lowland Indigenous women worked a roughly proportionate amount, the women of Europe did not enjoy the egalitarian position that many Indigenous women held. Historian Elizabeth Rapley, author of *The Dévotes*, argues that seventeenth-century France spawned "a growing male-female dichotomy, an aggressive antifeminism, [and] an irresistible trend towards patriarchy." Throughout the 1600s, French women were subjected to an increasing amount of social and legal control. The subordination of women in France was supported and propagated by the Catholic Church. Catholicism rarely allowed women to participate fully in either secular or lay activities.<sup>49</sup> Like the women of France, women in other parts of Europe experienced increasing subordination throughout the seventeenth century. Fewer employment opportunities for women, more control of the Christian churches over marriage and sexuality, and the witch hunts all served to increase the subordination of European women to men.<sup>50</sup>

It is interesting that Rapley attributes the increasing marginalization of French women to the fear which accompanied the Black Death. According to Rapley, "the aftershocks of the Black Death," included,

'great mortalities,' . . . schisms, wars, and social disruptions--and

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<sup>48</sup> Valerie Shirer Mathes, "A New Look at the Role of Women in Indian Society," in Roger L. Nichols, ed., *The American Indian: Past and Present*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley, 1981), 29-30.

<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 3-4, 12.

<sup>50</sup> Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1994), 37-47.

finally, . . . the devastating experience of the Reformation. To allay this mood of fear, scapegoats were sought and found, and among them were women.<sup>51</sup>

The aftershocks of epidemic disease in the St. Lawrence lowlands were incredibly similar to those which accompanied the Black Death in Europe. To paraphrase Rapley, epidemic disease in the St. Lawrence region was followed by tremendous mortality, estrangements, warfare, and social disruption, as well as the pressure to convert to Christianity. As in Europe, scapegoats were also sought in Iroquoian societies. Some scapegoats were Indigenous shamans. Others were women. The aftermath of widespread epidemic disease was very similar on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. It is logical to argue that if devastating epidemic disease increased the subordination of French women to French men, epidemics likely eroded the egalitarian position of Indigenous American women in the St. Lawrence region.

If European women and Indigenous women of the St. Lawrence lowlands worked equally as hard in their respective societies, why did Indigenous women enjoy a relatively egalitarian position while European became increasingly subordinated across the Atlantic? The power and prestige of Indigenous women was supported by two main buttresses. The first was women's crucial contribution to the subsistence of their societies. Among the Hurons, for example, women provided 85 per cent of the daily caloric intake.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, the use of corn as a trade food gave women a large role in the Huron economy. In comparison, Algonquian women did not

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<sup>51</sup> Rapley, *Dévotés*, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Heidenreich, *Huronie*, 163. According to Heidenreich, 85 per cent of a Huron's daily caloric intake consisted of agricultural products (65 per cent of which was corn). See note 27 (this chapter) for a specific analysis of caloric consumption among the Huron.

enjoy the power and prestige that Huron women did. Algonquian nations were dependent on men for subsistence. The Algonquians were largely hunter-gatherers.<sup>53</sup> The Jesuits described the Algonquians as nomads,

people scattered here and there, wherever the chase or the fishing may lead them . . . without a roof, without a house or fixed residence; and without gathering anything from the earth, beyond what it yields in a barren country to those who have never cultivated it.<sup>54</sup>

Unlike Iroquoian nations, Algonquians were dependent on the product of men's labour --hunted meat and fish--for survival. Fur, also largely the product of men's labour, was the main trade item of the Algonquians.<sup>55</sup> The small economic contribution of Algonquin women resulted in a correspondingly small amount of social power. Theoretically, Algonquian women held the right to divorce their husbands. However, divorce was rare among many Algonquian nations.<sup>56</sup>

The second reason Iroquoian women enjoyed a relatively large amount of power and prestige was the matrilocal and matrilineal practices of Iroquoian nations. The Hurons, like other Iroquoian peoples, resided in longhouses. Each longhouse sheltered an extended family group--usually a woman, her husband, her grown daughters, her daughters' husbands, and her grandchildren.<sup>57</sup> The matrilocal residence patterns of the Hurons were different from the patrilocal residency of the Algonquians. Although the Montagnais practiced matrilocality, newly married couples usually resided

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<sup>53</sup> Calvin Martin, *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 4.

<sup>54</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 23:205-7.

<sup>55</sup> Heidenreich, *Huronian*, 295.

<sup>56</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 3:103.

<sup>57</sup> Heidenreich, *Huronian*, 115.

with the husbands' families in other Algonquian groups.<sup>58</sup> Unlike many of the Algonquians, when a Huron man and woman married, they moved in with the woman's parents or other maternal relatives, such as her aunts. Huron women who never married, or who lost their husbands through divorce or death, remained in their mothers' longhouses. The members of each longhouse shared the products of their labour with one another. Married Huron men were obligated to share the products of their labour with their wives and children, as well as with their mothers and sisters. The subsistence needs of Huron women were met through a number of sources.<sup>59</sup>

The Hurons were not always a matrilocal and matrilineal society. The adoption of the sedentary horticultural lifestyle between AD 500 and AD 1000 was accompanied by a shift from patrilineal, patrilocal practices to matrilineal, matrilocal ones. The denser population that resulted from a sedentary community meant that the region's resources of game and fish became scarce. As a result, to pursue the hunt, men had to leave the villages for longer periods of time, which increasingly left day-to-day matters in the hands of women. Additionally, as horticulture became more important to the diet and social life of the Hurons, the producers of horticultural products--women--became crucial to the survival of the Huron Confederacy. The important economic role of women resulted in more social and political power. The increased power of women led to the establishment of a matrilineal and matrilocal society, and that society maintained and propagated the power of women.<sup>60</sup> The matrilocal and matrilineal practices

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<sup>58</sup> Martin, *Keepers*, 5.

<sup>59</sup> Anderson, "Huron Women," 143, 167-8.

<sup>60</sup> James Axtell, ed., *The Indian Peoples of Eastern North America: A Documentary History of the Sexes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).



of the Hurons were both a result of women's importance and a source of women's power.

Huron and Five Nations women held a great deal of political power. In a matrilineal society, the clan takes precedence over the nuclear family. As a result, Huron men acted as fathers to their sisters' children rather than to their own.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, the matrilineal practices of the Hurons meant that political office was inherited through one's maternal relatives. As a result, a man's position as chief could not be turned over to his son, but only to his brothers or to his sister's son.<sup>62</sup> As Grant succinctly writes, "[d]ecisions of state were made by men, in formal councils marked by rhetoric of a high order, but women chose those who were to make them."<sup>63</sup>

Because the Hurons were matrilineal and matrilineal, Huron women could exert pressure on Huron men. By threatening men with expulsion from their homes or ostracism within the clan, women, and especially mothers-in-law, were able to pressure Huron men to accept the decisions women made. The Jesuits related several instances in which Huron men were coerced into accepting decisions made by Huron women. For example, one Huron man who converted to Christianity was chased away from his clan's cabins, and was denied food by his female relatives. Another Huron man was divorced by his wife of fifteen or sixteen years after his mother-in-law objected to his conversion to Christianity.<sup>64</sup> While Huron women could not force Huron

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<sup>61</sup> Delâge, *Bitter Feast*, 58.

<sup>62</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 55. See also, Thwaites, *Relations*, 6:225, 10:223, 20:215, 38:265-7.

<sup>63</sup> John Webster Grant, *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter since 1534* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 20.

<sup>64</sup> Karen Lee Anderson, "Commodity Exchange and Subordination: Montagnais-Naskapi Women and Huron Women, 1600-1650," *Signs* 11, no.1 (Autumn 1985), 59-60.

men to obey their wishes, the control women had over the food supply and residence patterns gave them enough leverage to convince some men.<sup>65</sup>

The relative power and prestige of Indigenous women, particularly Iroquoian women, allowed them to participate in political life to an extent that contemporary European women could not. For example, Huron women attended the general councils held in their villages.<sup>66</sup> On occasion, women were even permitted to address the assemblies.<sup>67</sup> Generally, the Huron councils were led by a number of male chiefs. The chiefs had little real authority. Instead, as Champlain explained,

the older and leading men assemble[d] in a council, in which they settle[d] upon and propose[d] all that [was] necessary for the affairs of the village. This [was] done by a plurality of voices, or in accordance with the advice of some one among them whose judgment they consider[ed] superior: such a one [was] requested by the company to give his opinion on the propositions that [were] made, and this opinion [was] minutely obeyed.<sup>68</sup>

From a cursory examination of the available primary sources, it appears that women played only a minute role in Huron politics. However, a closer examination of the same sources shows that Huron women wielded considerable political power in comparison to contemporary European women.

One political duty performed by Huron women was the maintenance of the council fire. When a council was held by the entire Huron Confederacy, the meeting took place in the village of the nation's most

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<sup>65</sup> Anderson, "Huron Women," 66-7, 69.

<sup>66</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 17:169.

<sup>67</sup> Marie de l'Incarnation, *Word from New France: The Selected Letters of Marie de l'Incarnation*, Joyce Marshall, ed. and trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 82.

<sup>68</sup> Champlain, *Voyages*, 327.

important chief. The Jesuit Jean Brébeuf wrote in 1636, "[f]ormerly, each [man] brought his fagot to put on the fire; this is no longer the custom, the women of the Cabin take this responsibility . . ." <sup>69</sup> Brébeuf's comments seem to indicate that women's role in Huron politics had recently increased. Possibly, the importance of women's work in maintaining the Hurons' position as middlepersons in the fur trade induced Huron men to allow women a wider role in politics. <sup>70</sup>

Beyond this meager mention of women's participation in Huron politics, contemporary Europeans recorded little information about women's political role in Huronia. Sagard, however, unequivocally stated that among the Hurons, "women are not admitted to several of the men's feasts, nor to their councils." <sup>71</sup> However, as Anderson suggests, the biases of seventeenth-century European men may have not allowed them to understand the extent to which Huron women participated in political life. Additionally, the political power held by Huron women was indirect rather than direct. As a result, the extent of women's participation in Huronia's political sphere was not as visible as men's. For instance, there is no evidence that Huron women acted as chiefs. If Huron women had been chiefs, it is likely that European men would have mentioned this role since it was not one available to many European women. As Anderson points out,

[s]ince women's relations to political processes were never expressed in public ceremony (councils consisted of males) and since the Jesuits['] own ideology and experience gave them no reason to assume

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<sup>69</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 10:251. A fagot is a bundle of sticks.

<sup>70</sup> William N. Fenton, "Huronian: An Essay in Proper Ethnohistory," *American Anthropologist* 80, no. 4 (December 1978), 933.

<sup>71</sup> Sagard, *Grand Voyage*, 172. My translation.

that women had any influence, descriptions of women's role in politics are singularly lacking.

Because there is little historical documentation concerning the role of Huron women in politics, scholars must rely on information about other Iroquoian women to examine the participation of Huron women in political life.<sup>72</sup>

Among the eighteenth-century Iroquois, women held direct, as well as indirect, political power. The Iroquois Council of Clan Mothers was a political organization made up of the eldest women of each clan. The Clan Mothers exerted their political authority by selecting and removing chiefs, and also by pressuring the male chiefs to deal with policies adopted by the Clan Mothers.<sup>73</sup> Lafitau, who worked among the Mohawks at Caugnawaga from 1712-18, described the political authority that Mohawk women held. Admitting that he contradicted the authors of the *Relations*, Lafitau wrote:

Nothing is more real, however, than the women's superiority. It is they who really maintain the tribe, the nobility of the blood, the genealogical tree, the order of the generations and conservation of the families. *In them resides all the real authority:* the lands, the fields and all their harvest belong to them, they are the soul of the councils, the arbiters of peace and war; they hold the taxes and the public treasure; it is to them that the slaves are entrusted; they arrange the marriages; the children are under their authority; and the order of succession is founded on their blood. . . . And, although the chiefs are chosen among them, they are purely honorary. *The Council of Elders which transacts all the business does not work for itself. It seems that they serve only to represent and aid the women in matters in which decorum does not permit the latter to appear or act.*<sup>74</sup> (my emphasis)

Given the Iroquoian belief that all things are equal within the Circle of Life, Lafitau's passage appears exaggerated. However, to a seventeenth-century

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<sup>72</sup> Anderson, "Huron Women," 72-3, 75.

<sup>73</sup> Mathes, "New Look," 31-2.

<sup>74</sup> Lafitau, *Customs*, 1:xxx, 26, 69.

European man, the power of Iroquoian women must have appeared extraordinary. Many of the privileges of Iroquoian women--matrilocality and matrilineality, their control of the harvest, and their arrangement of their children's marriages--were powers allocated exclusively to men in European society. While women did not hold "all the real authority" in Iroquoian society, their power was very great by European standards.

Not all Mohawk women were as powerful as Lafitau implied. Some of the powers that Lafitau described could only be exerted by women who were the heads of longhouses.<sup>75</sup> In any case, Lafitau made his observation in the early 1700s. Scholars question how accurately descriptions of eighteenth-century Iroquoian women reflect the position of seventeenth-century Huron women. Much of the power of eighteenth-century Iroquoian women is attributed to their role following the dispersal of the Huron and other St. Lawrence lowland groups in the mid-seventeenth century. Women of the Five Nations were responsible for the integration of captives into their villages. Additionally, because Five Nations men were absent from their villages for long periods of time while participating in warfare, community affairs fell increasingly into the hands of women. As a result, the power and prestige of Five Nations women greatly increased over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>76</sup> For this reason, a comparison between eighteenth-century Iroquoian women and seventeenth-century Huron women may seem tenuous at best.

It is, however, unlikely that the women of early eighteenth-century Iroquoia could have gained the power Lafitau described if they had not had

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<sup>75</sup> Judith K. Brown, "Economic Organization and the Position of Women among the Iroquois," *Ethnohistory* 17, no. 3-4 (Summer/Fall, 1970), 153.

<sup>76</sup> Del  ge, *Bitter Feast*, 282.

any political or social power prior to the 1700s.<sup>77</sup> As well, Huron women of the 1600s, like eighteenth-century Iroquois women, controlled the production and distribution of corn, the main source of food for both groups. Scholar Judith Brown argues that Iroquois women of the 1700s maintained their authority by controlling the economic organization of Iroquoia.<sup>78</sup> It is likely that Huron women, through their sizable contribution to their economy, also acquired and maintained a certain amount of power. Finally, there are a few reference made to women's political and social power among the seventeenth-century Iroquoians. For example, in 1655 Marie de l'Incarnation received a visit from a "woman chief" of the Onondagas.<sup>79</sup> As well, most European writers acknowledged the control Iroquoian (including Huron) women had over the selection of chiefs.

In pre-contact times, Huron women enjoyed a relatively great amount of political, social, and economic power. Compared to European and Algonquian societies, Huronia allowed women more personal freedom as well as more public influence. While Huron women had little direct power, their control of the food supply, and the matrilocal and matrilineal practices of Huron society gave women indirect power. Although Huron women could not hold chiefly office, they controlled the political succession. Although Huron women did not participate directly in trade, they were responsible for producing the main trade good of Huronia--corn. And although their workload was strictly defined, Huron women enjoyed wide social freedom, which allowed them to initiate pre-marital sex and divorce. The power and prestige of women in pre-contact Huronia is further illuminated and

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<sup>77</sup> Lafitau, *Customs*, 1:69.

<sup>78</sup> Brown, "Economic Organization," 164.

<sup>79</sup> de l'Incarnation, *Letters*, 222.

reinforced through myth. Aataentsic, the mother of all people, had the world created for her alone. The story of Aataentsic reflects the position Huron women held in their society. Huron women were capable of nurturing themselves and their children without any help from men. More important, though, the legend of Aataentsic demonstrates the Huron belief that women were responsible for life--both by giving birth and by providing the food and nurturing necessary to sustain life.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Delâge, *Bitter Feast*, 50.

## Chapter Two

### Disease and Medicine in Huronia during the Pre-Contact and Contact Eras

The arrival of Europeans in the St. Lawrence lowlands was accompanied by widespread epidemic disease. Thousands of Indigenous people died from the introduced diseases. Many more succumbed to the famine and warfare that accompanied the epidemics. It is clear from the records of contemporary Europeans that contagious disease and the concomitant high mortality had never been experienced in the St. Lawrence region before contact. Time and again, Indigenous people told Europeans that "since the coming of the French their nation[s were] going to destruction,--that before they had seen Europeans only the old people died, but that now more young than old died."<sup>1</sup> Indigenous people repeatedly beseeched the Europeans to stop the diseases from spreading. Short of leaving the New World, however, the Europeans could do nothing to check the spread of the deadly maladies.

North America was virtually free of serious contagious disease prior to contact with Europeans.<sup>2</sup> The most widely accepted theory regarding the absence of contagious disease in the Americans is the "cold screen" hypothesis. The cold screen theory is based on the assumption that the

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<sup>1</sup> Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, 73 volumes (New York, Pagan, 1959), 11:193-5.

<sup>2</sup> Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History since 1492* (Norman, Oklahoma: Oklahoma University Press, 1987), 39.



earliest ancestors of Indigenous people came to North America over the Bering land bridge. Scholars theorize that the crossing from Siberia into Alaska had two important consequences. First, the extreme cold killed any germs that the emigrants carried with them. Second, only the hardiest people could survive the arduous crossing and the cold. Any people with debilitating illnesses died. Not only were most disease-causing germs eradicated, but the human carriers of the germs were eliminated as well.<sup>3</sup> By entering North America via the Bering land bridge, the earliest Native people shed most contagious diseases and disease-causing organisms.

Once the newly arrived Indigenous people moved south into warmer climates, they were able to remain free of epidemic disease primarily due to the lack of domesticated animals in North America. In South America, Indigenous people domesticated the llama, the alpaca, and the guinea pig. While some North American Indigenous people domesticated the turkey, the nations of the St. Lawrence region domesticated only the dog in pre-contact times.<sup>4</sup> The paucity of domesticated animals was an advantage. As historian William McNeill explains, "[m]ost and probably all of the distinctive infectious diseases of civilization transferred to human populations from animal herds."<sup>5</sup> Indigenous people were never exposed to diseases that originated with or were communicated by domesticated animals. Historian Calvin Martin argues that wildlife diseases were passed to Indigenous hunters, and occasionally to gatherers and horticulturists. Although Martin's thesis is plausible, he himself admits that there is little evidence regarding the

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<sup>3</sup> Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1972), 31.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>5</sup> William McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 51.

communication of disease between wild animals and Indigenous Americans.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the contact between ill wildlife and Native people was probably not lengthy or intimate.<sup>7</sup> Although wildlife diseases may have been communicated to Indigenous people, the diseases were probably not a large factor in pre-contact Indigenous illness or mortality.

Settlement patterns in pre-contact North America also contributed to the lack of contagious disease. Surviving an attack of contagious disease such as smallpox or measles usually results in immunity from future outbreaks of the disease. Disease-causing pathogens can only continue to spread as long as there are members of a community who have not been previously exposed to them. Only communities of several million people can sustain any one pathogen for an indeterminate amount of time. North American Indigenous peoples lived in relatively small groups. As a result, any pathogens that may have existed would not have survived among so few hosts.<sup>8</sup>

The virtual absence of contagious disease did not mean that North America was a "completely disease free demographic paradise."<sup>9</sup> The Hurons and other groups of the St. Lawrence region suffered from some illnesses before the arrival of Europeans. Among the most prevalent pre-contact diseases were: bacillary and amoebic dysentery; viral influenza and pneumonia; a number of rickettsial fevers; nutritional deficiency diseases;

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<sup>6</sup> Calvin Martin, "Wildlife Diseases as a Factor in the Depopulation of the North American Indian," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 7, no.1 (January 1976), 49.

<sup>7</sup> McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, 52.

<sup>8</sup> Marshall T. Newman, "Aboriginal New World Epidemiology and Medical Care, and the Impact of Old World Disease Imports," *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 45, no.3 pt. 2 (1976), 668.

<sup>9</sup> Thorton, *Holocaust*, 39.

and food poisoning. Contagious diseases, however, were rare. Some scholars speculate that typhus and tuberculosis were present in pre-contact times, but there is little supporting evidence.<sup>10</sup> Other scholars argue that syphilis originated in the New World, and was spread to Europe by Christopher Columbus's crew. There is little evidence, however, to support this theory. Moreover, most of the debate over syphilis is geographically confined to Mexico and South America.<sup>11</sup> If syphilis did exist in the Americas before contact, it was not prevalent in northeastern North America. No contemporary European mentioned or alluded to venereal diseases among the Hurons. In any case, Sagard noted in the early 1600s that the Hurons were "exempt from a lot of illnesses to which we [Europeans] are subject[ed]."<sup>12</sup>

Pre-contact Indigenous people were amazingly healthy by today's standards. In addition to their freedom from contagious disease, Native people rarely suffered from physical disabilities. Among the Five Nations, Van der Donck found that,

[c]ripples, hunch-backed, or other bodily infirmities, are so rare, that we may say that there are none amongst them; and when we see or hear of one who is crippled or lame, we on inquiry find the same to have originated by accident or war.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Newman, "New World Epidemiology," 668-9.

<sup>11</sup> James McIntosh and Paul Fildes, *Syphilis: From the Modern Standpoint* (London: Edward Arnold, 1911), 3-7.

<sup>12</sup> Gabriel Sagard, *Le Grand Voyage du Pays des Hurons* (Quebec: Bibliothèque Québécoise, 1990), 215. My translation.

<sup>13</sup> Adriaen Van der Donck, *A Description of the New Netherlands*, Thomas F. O'Donnell, ed. (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1968), 72. It may be asked whether the low incidence of physical disabilities among the Hurons was due to infanticide. While it is possible, there is no evidence that the Hurons practiced infanticide for any reason. While the Jesuits mentioned that infanticide was common among the Algonquians (Thwaites, *Relations*, 30:247), the priests did not mention a single instance

Like the Five Nations, the Hurons suffered from few physical disabilities. Sagard met only one one-eyed person and one lame man during his stay in the St. Lawrence region.<sup>14</sup> Physical deformities were so rare among early seventeenth-century Algonquians that the Jesuit Pierre Biard noted, "[a]ny of our people who have some defect, such as the one-eyed, the squint-eyed, and flat-nosed, are immediately noticed by them and greatly derided."<sup>15</sup>

Despite the relative health of Indigenous people, life expectancy was quite short in the pre-contact era. Historian Erwin Ackerknecht estimates that the average Native person lived fewer than thirty years.<sup>16</sup> However, many seventeenth-century European observers noted that Indigenous people often lived very long lives. Lafitau, for example, wrote:

If they can avoid . . . accidents which cannot always be averted, they reach an extreme old age in which it is necessary to kill them or expect to see them die through simple natural failure . . .<sup>17</sup>

The historical sources offer no exact evidence regarding the life expectancy in Huronia. The historical evidence, however, indicates that many Hurons lived past the age of thirty. While the Jesuits did not record an estimate of Huron life expectancy, they often wrote of grandmothers and grandfathers.<sup>18</sup> Champlain observed that, ". . . when a [Huron] girl has reached the age of

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of infanticide among the Hurons. Further, according to the Jesuits, the Hurons showed deep feeling only over the death of a child (Thwaites, *Relations*, 23:183-5).

<sup>14</sup> Sagard, *Grand Voyage*, 215.

<sup>15</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 3:75.

<sup>16</sup> Erwin H. Ackerknecht, *Medicine and Ethnology: Selected Essays*, H. H. Walser and H. M. Koelbing, eds. (Bern, Switzerland: Verlag Huber, 1971), 27. Trigger states that the life expectancy in pre-contact Huronia is difficult to calculate because very few skeletal remains have been studied in detail (*Aataentsic*, 440).

<sup>17</sup> Joseph-François Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Tribes*, William N. Fenton and Elizabeth L. Moore, eds., 2 volumes (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1974), 2:202.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Thwaites, *Relations*, 9:283-5; 19:235; 23:127.

eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, or fifteen years she has suitors . . . who woo her for some time."<sup>19</sup> In Huronia, women often had several suitors before choosing a marriage partner. Assuming that the average Huron girl married by age fifteen, she could become a grandmother at approximately age thirty or thirty-two. Many Huron women clearly lived much longer than thirty years. The Huron woman, discussed in Chapter One, who divorced her husband of fifteen or sixteen years, must have been approximately thirty years of age. Her mother, who encouraged the divorce, must have been well over forty years old.

If pre-contact North America was free from contagious disease, and if many Indigenous people lived longer than thirty years, why do modern scholars estimated Indigenous life expectancy at less than thirty years? The extremely short life expectancy calculated by Ackerknecht and other scholars may be attributed to a number of factors. The historian Russell Thornton argues that Indigenous life may have been shortened due to warfare, human sacrifice, accidents, high rates of infant and maternal mortality, famine, and the few disease that were present before the arrival of Europeans. Despite the hazards, however, the life expectancy of pre-contact Indigenous people was roughly comparable to that of their European contemporaries.<sup>20</sup>

Seventeenth-century Europeans lived with a vast number of communicable diseases. In the 1600s, European life was accompanied by killers such as measles, chicken pox, smallpox, scarlet fever, diphtheria, typhoid fever, and influenza. Raging epidemics, such as the black death of the fourteenth century, claimed the lives of millions of people. Medicine was

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<sup>19</sup> Samuel de Champlain, *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain, 1604-1618*, W. L. Grant, ed. (New York: Scribner, 1907), 319.

<sup>20</sup> Thornton, *Holocaust*, 41.

a very inexact science in Europe during the 1600s and 1700s. As the historian Vincent Knapp states, "[t]hroughout this era, most intellectual observers simply explained away the presence of disease as the result of either divine, astrological or miasmatic influences." The origin of disease was not the only medical issue surrounded by uncertainty. Diagnosis and medical treatments were also dubitable. To a large extent, the treatments prescribed were based on superstition, and for that reason, were usually ineffective."<sup>21</sup> Despite the ignorance surrounding medical issues in Europe, seventeenth-century Europeans were quick to point out the inefficacies they perceived in Indigenous medicine.<sup>22</sup>

In pre-contact times, Indigenous medicine was sophisticated enough to cope with existing medical problems.<sup>23</sup> As historian Cornelius Jaenen points out, "aboriginal knowledge of basic medicine was remarkable."<sup>24</sup> Indigenous Americans were adept at creating emetics from the bark of cedar and fir trees, as well as from a variety of roots.<sup>25</sup> As the well-known story of Jacques Cartier's crew illustrates, Indigenous Americans were also proficient at diagnosing and treating nutritional deficiency diseases such as scurvy. Because of the inclusion of fresh meat in their diet, Indigenous people rarely

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<sup>21</sup> Vincent J. Knapp, *Disease and its Impact on Modern European History* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen, 1989), 5, 195-6.

<sup>22</sup> Stephan M. Clark, *Smallpox and the Iroquois Wars: An Ethnographical Study of the Influence of the Demographic Change on Iroquoian Culture History, 1630-1700* (Salinas, California: Coyote Press, 1981), 12. See, for example, Thwaites, *Relations*, 17:121.

<sup>23</sup> Newman, "New World Epidemiology," 667.

<sup>24</sup> Cornelius J. Jaenen, *Friend and Foe: Aspects of French-Amerindian Cultural Contact in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), 105.

<sup>25</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 22:293.

suffered from scurvy.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, Indigenous remedies for scurvy were quite efficient. Cartier clearly thought that Indigenous medical knowledge was superior, at least in some respects, to European medical knowledge. After his crew was cured of scurvy, Cartier commented, "[a]nd in those six days [the tea made of fir boughs] worked more wonders than all the physicians in Louvain and Montpellier using all the drugs in Alexandria could have done in a year."<sup>27</sup> The "masterpiece" of Indigenous American medicine, however, was the curing of wounds, lacerations, ruptures, dislocations, sprains, and fractures.<sup>28</sup> In the St. Lawrence lowlands, Indigenous people treated wounds through scarification and with ointments created from herbs or roots.<sup>29</sup> The expert curing, and concomitant quick healing, of open wounds amazed the French.<sup>30</sup> There were few medical problems in pre-contact North America that Indigenous people were unable to treat.

Modern-day conceptions of western medicine are far removed from the seventeenth-century Indigenous concept of medicine. To understand the Indigenous concept more fully, it is helpful to develop a new definition of "medicine." Perhaps Ackerknecht offers the best definition: "every known human society develops methods to deal with disease, and thus creates a medicine."<sup>31</sup> To Indigenous Americans, medicine was more than a method of curing illness or injury. In pre-contact North America, medicine

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<sup>26</sup> C. S. Houston, "Scurvy and Canadian Exploration," *Canadian Books of Medical History* 7 (1990), 163.

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Cartier, *Jacques Cartier et "La Grosse Maladie"* (Montreal: Congrès International de Physiologie, 1953), 101-2.

<sup>28</sup> Lafitau, *Customs*, 2:204, 206.

<sup>29</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 22:293.

<sup>30</sup> Jaenen, *Friend and Foe*, 105.

<sup>31</sup> Ackerknecht, *Medicine and Ethnology*, 18.

comprised a number of beliefs, rituals, and customs (as well as charms and a pharmacopoeia) that were practiced to ensure "a person's happiness and sense of personal fulfillment."<sup>32</sup> Medicine permeated virtually every aspect of Indigenous life. Medical practices were intertwined with political, social, and religious activities. The medical practices of Indigenous people existed, "quite clearly much more as a function of culture than as a function of biology." Without taking the cultural aspects of Indigenous illness and medicine into consideration, an understanding or evaluation of Native medical practices cannot be achieved.<sup>33</sup>

Medicine and politics were interwoven in pre-contact North America. Quite often, councils were held to determine whether to hold a curing ceremony. If the council decided to approve the ceremony, the chiefs subsequently ordered the village residents to participate.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, when important persons fell ill in Huronia, the chiefs would visit them to find out what they desired for their recovery. Then the chiefs would ask the villagers to fulfill the desires of the ailing persons. The Jesuits recorded that there was often a rivalry among the village residents as they all tried to be the first to grant the wishes of the sick persons.<sup>35</sup>

Medicine and illness also had powerful social functions in pre-contact North America. Disease provided a form of social sanction. Indigenous people, like their European counterparts, believed that disease was often a punishment inflicted by supernatural forces for misbehaviour. Therefore,

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<sup>32</sup> Bruce G. Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660*, reprint (Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), 81.

<sup>33</sup> Ackerknecht, *Medicine and Ethnology*, 15, 42.

<sup>34</sup> Sagard, *Grand Voyage*, 286.

<sup>35</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 10:175, 213.



when Indigenous people fell ill, they would ask themselves what rule they had broken to deserve such punishment. Many Native Americans believed that a breach of social mores culminated in disease.<sup>36</sup> In this way, disease allowed Indigenous societies control over each person's conduct. Additionally, Indigenous people thought certain diseases were caused by witches' spells. Any person accused of causing illness through witchcraft could be executed. Those incriminated were given no chance to explain or to deny the charges prior to their execution. It was wise for Indigenous people to avoid suspicious activities. It was also best not to antagonize anyone, because retribution could involve an accusation of witchcraft, which could lead to death.<sup>37</sup> In these ways, disease and medicine were also interwoven with social practices in pre-contact times.

More complex than the connections between medicine and politics or social issues, were the ties between medicine and religion. As historian J. R. Miller notes, "[t]here was no distinction whatever between medicine and religion for the simple reason that disease was believed to be caused by evil spirits . . ."<sup>38</sup> Illness, accidents, and death were often attributed to supernatural forces. In order to appease the forces at work, Indigenous people employed supernatural medical practices, such as spells, prayers, or group rituals like dances and feasts. Ackerknecht refers to supernatural medicine as "magico-religious." Quite often, magico-religious medical

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<sup>36</sup> Ackerknecht, *Medicine and Ethnology*, 15-16, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 14:37-9.

<sup>38</sup> J. R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 13.

practices were accompanied by "natural" medicine, such as emetics, herbal teas, or ointments.<sup>39</sup>

It was not only medical practices which incorporated both religious and natural medical elements. Shamans employed the supernatural to uncover natural remedies.<sup>40</sup> For example, shamans consulted spirits to determine the cause of sickness. Once the causative agent was located, shamans would prescribe magico-religious rites or natural remedies as a cure.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, the diagnostic act performed by shamans had important physical and mental consequences for the patient. The knowledge that one's illness could be cured affected the patient's mental outlook, which in turn had an impact on one's physical well-being.<sup>42</sup> As McNeill argues, the role of the shaman, "was strictly comparable to that of the priesthood, whose ministrations to the soul relieved anxieties parallel to those relieved by medical ministrations to the body."<sup>43</sup>

In pre-contact North America, the duties of the shaman went beyond curing physical ailments. Martin argues that "[c]ontrol over . . . supernatural forces and communication with them were the principle function of the shaman, who served . . . as an intermediary between the spirit realm and the physical." The shamans' expertise in communicating with and manipulating supernatural forces had an impact on their patients' health.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, the work performed by shamans quelled the fears of the sick and injured.

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<sup>39</sup> Ackerknecht, *Medicine and Ethnology*, 21, 121, 123, 128.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>41</sup> Lafitau, *Customs*, 2:209-10, 213.

<sup>42</sup> Ackerknecht, *Medicine and Ethnology*, 25.

<sup>43</sup> McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, 237.

<sup>44</sup> Calvin Martin, *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 37.

Ackerknecht argues that a shaman "gives peace by confessing his patient. His rigid system . . . dispels fear, restores confidence, and inspires hope." Shamans also had a large role in the social life of Indigenous nations. In the wake of widespread disasters, the success of shamans went a long way toward the preservation of order and security. Through their supernatural powers, shamans caused illness in and countered the spells of enemies. Additionally, the whole culture of the Indigenous nation was bound up in the rituals of the shamans. When performing diagnoses or cures, shamans took into consideration the religious and historical beliefs of the nation. In many ways, the shaman was responsible for sustaining and propagating the culture of his people.<sup>45</sup>

In Huron society, there were two different types of shamans.<sup>46</sup> The first, who had contact with supernatural forces, were known as *arendiwane*. Both men and women could aspire to the office of *arendiwane*.<sup>47</sup> However, if the Hurons enforced the same rules upon their shamans as nations such as the Chippewas and the Crows did, only post-menopausal women were allowed to become *arendiwane*.<sup>48</sup> The second type of Huron shamans were those who healed the sick and the injured. There were two types of healers. The *ocata* performed diagnoses and prescribed treatment. The *aretsan* was a specialist who extracted disease-causing witches' spells from patients. Trigger claims that healers were more important than *arendiwane*, and that

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<sup>45</sup> Ackerknecht, *Medicine and Ethnology*, 130-2.

<sup>46</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 17:211-13.

<sup>47</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 79.

<sup>48</sup> Valerie Shirer Mathes, "A New Look at the Role of Women in Indian Society," 27-33, in Roger L. Nichols, ed., *The American Indian: Past and Present*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley, 1981), 31. Mathes also lists the Shastas and Yuroks of California, the Walapais of Arizona, and the Comanches as nations which allowed post-menopausal women the position of shaman.

only men could aspire to the offices of *ocata* and *aretsan*.<sup>49</sup> Anderson, however, argues that, "both sexes could occupy positions of prestige as healers and 'sorcerers' . . . " <sup>50</sup> Although the *Relations* make reference to several women healers among the Montagnais and Algonquin nations, the Jesuits did not mention any Huron women healers. It is possible, then, that Huron women did not heal the sick and injured in an official capacity. However, Huron women prescribed treatment for their sick children based on dreams the women had.<sup>51</sup> As well, Huron women were essential participants in many healing rituals, such as songs, dances, and feasts.<sup>52</sup> Even if Huron women did not act as official healers, they could become *arendiwane*, and they healed through fulfilling their dreams and by participating in curing ceremonies. For these reasons, it is clear that Huron women treated disease and injury in pre-contact times.

Traditionally, the Hurons believed that there were three sources of illness. The first was natural. Disease which originated from natural sources was treated with natural remedies such as herbal teas, ointments, and sweatbaths. Any illness or injury not cured by natural remedies was believed to be caused by unnatural forces. The Hurons thought another source of disease was witchcraft. When witchcraft was suspected as the cause of sickness, the *aretsan* was called and asked to "uncover or dispel the evil charm which [was] killing the person against whom it [was] directed." The *aretsan* removed the spell with emetics or by sucking it out. To prove that

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<sup>49</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 80.

<sup>50</sup> Karen Lee Anderson, "Huron Women and Huron Men: The Effects of Demography, Kinship, and the Social Division of Labour on Male/Female Relations among the Seventeenth-Century Huron" (Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Toronto, 1983), 69.

<sup>51</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 8:261, 24:31-3, 10:173.

<sup>52</sup> Anderson, "Huron Women," 71.

the spell was removed, the *aretsan* produced tangible evidence, such as a knot of hair or a small stone. Once the Jesuits arrived in Huronia, they closely watched many *aretsan* at work. Although the Jesuits remained unconvinced that the *aretsan* actually withdrew articles from the patient, the production of evidence held definite therapeutic power. As Ackernecht argues, ". . . catastrophic physiological consequences [may stem from] conscious and unconscious fear." By removing a symbol of illness, Huron shamans quelled the anxiety of their patients.<sup>53</sup>

The third cause of illness in Huronia was unfulfilled desires. At times, the patient recognized his own desires from dreams he had had. Other times, the ill person was unaware of his desires, and only a shaman was able to divine them. The interpretation of dreams was developed to "a degree of psychoanalytical sophistication that was superior to that of most educated contemporary Europeans."<sup>54</sup> Many dreams revealed desires that were usually considered socially unacceptable. Requests for material goods, such as canoes or cakes of tobacco, were the antithesis of Huron customs of sharing and generosity. Requests to humiliate other people were contrary to the amiability maintained in Huronia. Yet, it was believed that an ill person would die if his requests were not fulfilled. As such, these socially unacceptable requests allowed Hurons to satisfy desires that otherwise would have to be suppressed. As Trigger explains,

[i]n a society where there were strong pressures for social conformity and personal restraint, this device provided a necessary outlet for personal feelings. Through their soul desires, individuals who felt

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<sup>53</sup> Lafitau, *Customs*, 2:203-4; Thwaites, *Relations*, 33:199-201; Ackernecht, *Medicine and Ethnology*, 25-6.

<sup>54</sup> Clark, *Smallpox and Wars*, 50.

neglected abused or insecure could indirectly make claims upon the community for psychological support.

The support offered to one another in Huronia was an important component of Huron medicine.<sup>55</sup>

Once it was determined what the desires of the patient were, every effort was made to satisfy them. To fulfill the desires of important people, general assemblies were called and all the residents of a village were asked to contribute what they could.<sup>56</sup> Huron women, and not only men, were entitled to ask for, and receive, their souls' desires.<sup>57</sup> When the council decided not to help someone, that patient's family did the best they could to satisfy his wishes.<sup>58</sup> Sometimes, requests were fulfilled only symbolically, because the actual requests were exorbitant, destructive, or unobtainable.<sup>59</sup>

Another way illness was treated in pre-contact Huronia was through curing ceremonies, which consisted of feasts, dances, games, and other rituals. Curing ceremonies were held for both men and women.<sup>60</sup> The Jesuits noted that there were a number of different types of feasts, and each feast could cure only one specific illness. Likewise, the twelve dances that the Jesuits mentioned were also prescribed only for certain illnesses. Huron women were essential participants in the dances. Games were occasionally ordered as a cure, either as a shaman's prescription or in response to an ill person's request. People from a number of villages would gather to play a game such as crosse, dish, or straw.<sup>61</sup> Finally, there were a number of rituals

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<sup>55</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 82-4.

<sup>56</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 33:207.

<sup>57</sup> Anderson, "Huron Women," 70.

<sup>58</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 10:173.

<sup>59</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 82.

<sup>60</sup> Anderson, "Huron Women," 70.

<sup>61</sup> Crosse was the forerunner of the modern game of lacrosse. Dish was played with six

which were performed to cure illnesses. One ritual, held at least once each winter, was performed when a number of villagers were ill or depressed, or when an important person fell ill. This ritual, called *Ononharoia*, allowed people to break into each other's longhouses, disturbing the furniture and breaking pots. During the three-day festival, ill Hurons were given numerous gifts, in hope of their recovery. Another ritual, which Trigger describes as the most "sensational," involved sexual intercourse. Occasionally, to effect a cure, the young unmarried people of a village, or an ill man and a young woman, would publicly engage in sexual intercourse.<sup>62</sup> Regardless of the type of curing ceremony, most villages would participate *en masse*. The large-scale participation in curing ceremonies demonstrates the extent to which all people were responsible for the health of every individual in the community.

The traditional medical practices of the Hurons did not prepare them for the devastating epidemics which accompanied Europeans to North America. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, Indigenous people had never experienced diseases such as smallpox, measles, influenza, diphtheria, or scarlet fever. As a result, the epidemics that raged in North America after contact are called virgin soil epidemics. Historian Alfred W. Crosby defines virgin soil epidemics as those in which "the populations at risk have had no

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plum stones, coloured white on one side and black on the other. The stones were placed in a dish, which was struck against the ground hard enough to make the stones bounce out of the dish and onto the ground. The object of the game was to guess how many stones would land with the white (or black) side facing up. Straw was played with numerous straws or rushes that were approximately ten inches long. The straws were divided into unequal bunches and were passed among the participants. The game was difficult for contemporary French observers to understand, and its rules remain unclear. Thwaites, *Relations*, 10: 183-7, 321-2.

<sup>62</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 83.

previous contact with the diseases that strike them and are therefore immunologically almost defenseless."<sup>63</sup> Crosby argues that the longer people have been isolated from disease-causing pathogens, the more those people suffer once the pathogens are introduced. Unfortunately, North American Indigenous people were isolated from the rest of the world for several millennia.<sup>64</sup>

Once Indigenous people were exposed to the introduced pathogens, the incidence of disease was extraordinarily high. Archaeologist Susan Johnston argues that the Hurons experienced an incidence of nearly one hundred percent.<sup>65</sup> The high incidence rate, in turn, produced a high mortality rate. It is difficult to calculate the mortality rate caused by epidemic disease in Huronia during the 1630s and 1640s. Scholarly estimates vary widely. From a low of fifty per cent, to a high of eighty per cent, scholars disagree on the population loss in Huronia due to epidemic disease.<sup>66</sup> Part of the problem in calculating an accurate mortality estimate is the controversy surrounding the population of pre-contact Huronia (see Chapter One). Additionally, during the epidemics, mortality was affected by more than the introduced diseases themselves. In early seventeenth-century Huronia, the physical consequences of contagious disease had a huge impact

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<sup>63</sup> Alfred W. Crosby, "Virgin Soil Epidemics as a Factor in the Aboriginal Depopulation in America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3, ser. 33 (April 1976), 289.

<sup>64</sup> Crosby, *Columbian Exchange*, 37.

<sup>65</sup> Susan Johnston, "Epidemics: The Forgotten Factor in Seventeenth Century Native Warfare in the St. Lawrence Region," in Bruce Alden Cox, ed., *Native People, Native Lands: Canadian Indians, Inuit and Metis* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1988), 17.

<sup>66</sup> Karl H. Schlesier, "Epidemics and Indian Middlemen: Rethinking the Wars of the Iroquois, 1609-1653," *Ethnohistory* 23, no. 2 (Spring 1976), 141. Schlesier's estimate is 80 per cent. Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 499. Trigger's estimate is 50 per cent. Johnston, "Forgotten Factor," 17. Johnston's estimate is 65 per cent.



on mortality. For instance, epidemic disease was accompanied by secondary infections, such as pneumonia, that claimed the lives of many. As well, the inability of the ill to harvest or hunt caused widespread famine, which also caused many deaths.<sup>67</sup>

It is probable that contagious disease arrived in Huronia long before the first contact was made with the French in 1609. Certainly, Europeans had been in the Americas for well over a century before meeting Hurons. Although Cartier was the first known European to travel into the St. Lawrence region, Miller argues that fishing boats, piloted by the Basques, Spanish, French, and English, traveled to present-day Newfoundland and Nova Scotia in the fifteenth century. These European fishermen ventured on shore in order to dry their catch before transporting it home. Once on land, the fishermen made contact with Indigenous people, particularly the Miq'mak. The contact between the two groups culminated in a commercial relationship.<sup>68</sup> It is possible that the Miq'mak were exposed to European contagious disease in the early stages of the relationship. Other Indigenous groups also experienced introduced contagious disease prior to 1609. The St. Lawrence Iroquoians lost ten per cent of their population to contagious disease during the winter of 1535-6.<sup>69</sup> The Indigenous people of Hispaniola suffered from smallpox outbreaks before 1518. This smallpox epidemic spread to Mexico, Peru, and north of the Rio Grande.<sup>70</sup> It is entirely possible

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<sup>67</sup> Johnston, "Forgotten Factor," 17.

<sup>68</sup> Miller, *Skyscrapers*, 16.

<sup>69</sup> Bruce G. Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers: Canada's "Heroic Age" Reconsidered*, reprint (Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), 236-7. Although Trigger cites the epidemic at Stadacona as occurring in "1635-6," it is obviously a typographical error.

<sup>70</sup> John Duffy, *Epidemics in Colonial America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1953), 69-70.

that diseases which originally infected the Miq'mak, the St. Lawrence Iroquoians, or the Indigenous people of Hispaniola eventually turned up in Huronia. Through trade or warfare, contagious disease may have been passed from nation to nation until reaching the Hurons.

Contagious disease that did infect the Hurons prior to 1609, however, was probably not rampant. During the epidemic cycles of the 1630s, Hurons often remarked that they had never before seen such widespread disease and death. As one Huron stated,

I have seen maladies in this country before, but never have I seen anything like this; [two] or [three] moons sufficed for us to see the end of those . . . but now we already count a year since we began to be afflicted, and we see as yet no probability of soon beholding the end of our misery.<sup>71</sup>

The epidemics the Hurons experienced in the 1630s, then, produced death on a scale never before witnessed in Huronia.

It is difficult to determine exactly which contagious diseases infected the Hurons in the 1630s. There are three reasons why the epidemics in Huronia cannot be identified with certainty. First, medical knowledge in the seventeenth century was imprecise. Even generations of European physicians, who had treated contagious disease for centuries, had little scientific understanding of contagious disease. Second, the records of the epidemics were written by non-medical observers. Writers like the Jesuits had neither the skill nor the interest to determine the exact nature of the infections. The Jesuits appeared more interested in saving souls than in saving lives. In 1646, Jérôme Lalament felt that the epidemics had been "beneficent" because, "while [God's] justice was slaying bodies at the great

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<sup>71</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 15:43.

deluge of the world, [H]is mercy continued to gather up the penitent souls."<sup>72</sup> Third, virgin soil populations experience disease differently from previously exposed populations. Symptoms may be more intense and the course of the infection may be shorter in virgin soil epidemics.<sup>73</sup> Even with today's increased medical understanding, it is difficult to determine exactly from which diseases the Hurons suffered.

It is known, however, that the Hurons experienced three independent epidemic cycles--1634-5, 1636-7, and 1639. It is the identity of the first cycle which scholars dispute most. Demographer Henry Dobyns and Johnston contend the first contagious disease to infect Hurons was measles.<sup>74</sup> Trigger concedes that it may have been measles; however, he also argues that it may have been influenza.<sup>75</sup> Delâge believes that the first cycle was smallpox.<sup>76</sup> Since the symptoms of smallpox and measles are quite similar, and since the majority of scholars maintain that the first contagious disease in Huronia was measles, it is likely that the 1634-5 cycle was measles. There is more consensus regarding the epidemic of 1636-7. Trigger argues that the second outbreak actually consisted of two separate infections--influenza and scarlet fever.<sup>77</sup> Although other scholars tend to suggest only one disease for the second cycle, their suggestions are either influenza or scarlet fever.<sup>78</sup> It

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 38:131.

<sup>73</sup> McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, 61.

<sup>74</sup> Henry F. Dobyns, *Their Number Become Thinned: Native American Population Dynamics in Eastern North America* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), 22; Johnston, "Forgotten Factor," 15-16.

<sup>75</sup> Trigger, *Newcomers*, 230.

<sup>76</sup> Delâge, *Bitter Feast*, 86.

<sup>77</sup> Trigger, *Newcomers*, 230-1.

<sup>78</sup> Dobyns, *Thinned*, 22; Johnston, "Forgotten Factor," 16; Delâge, *Bitter Feast*, 86-7. Dobyns suggests the 1636-7 epidemic was scarlet fever. Johnston and Delâge argue it was influenza.

appears likely that Trigger's hypothesis is correct. Finally, scholars generally agree that the 1639 cycle was one of smallpox.<sup>79</sup>

Each cycle of contagious disease had tremendous physical consequences for the Hurons. First and foremost was widespread death. However, many of those who escaped death still had to cope with the physical effects of contagious disease. Secondary infections, high fevers, and headaches resulted from most of the infections.<sup>80</sup> Patients suffering from smallpox were subjected to scars that the disease left. Women, however, usually experienced the same disease differently than men. Pregnant and breast-feeding women, in particular, suffered more severe symptoms and more frequent death during outbreaks of epidemic disease. Measles, for example, causes death in pregnant women more frequently than in non-pregnant women.<sup>81</sup> Smallpox often causes premature delivery of infants, as well as fetal death.<sup>82</sup> Additionally, smallpox impairs the genitourinary tracts of many infected women.<sup>83</sup> It is clear that contagious disease physically affected Huron women differently than men. The impact of epidemic disease on women was necessarily different from the impact on men.

Prior to the arrival of Europeans, North America was virtually free of contagious disease. Because they had never been exposed to the pathogens

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<sup>79</sup> Trigger, *Newcomers*, 231; Johnston, "Forgotten Factor," 16; Delâge, *Bitter Feast*, 87; Dobyns, *Thinned*, 22.

<sup>80</sup> George A. Nankervis, "Measles," in Avron Y. Sweet and Edwin G. Brown, eds., *Fetal and Neonatal Effects of Maternal Disease* (St. Louis: Mosby, 1991), 71; George F. Dick and Gladys Henry Dick, *Scarlet Fever* (Chicago: Year Book, 1938), 31, 34; Knapp, *Disease and its Impact*, 171.

<sup>81</sup> Nankervis, "Measles," 71.

<sup>82</sup> James Barry Hanshaw, et al. eds., *Viral Diseases of the Fetus and Newborn*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1985), 176.

<sup>83</sup> Dobyns, *Thinned*, 14.

that caused epidemics such as influenza, smallpox, measles, and scarlet fever, Indigenous people had never developed the antibodies necessary to fight the introduced diseases. Therefore, the incidence rate of contagious disease was high--in some cases, 100 per cent. Mortality was also very high. The traditional practices of Native Americans were not able to treat the new infections successfully. Although the same remedies were available to both Huron men and women, the introduced diseases affected women differently from men. Regardless of gender, however, all Hurons suffered from the effects of contagious disease. Introduced disease had a tremendous impact on all aspects of Huron life.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **The Physical Impact of Epidemic Disease on Huron Women**

The responses of the Hurons to epidemic disease were wide-ranging and diverse. No aspect of Indigenous life was left untouched by the introduced diseases. Politically, economically, and culturally, the Hurons and other Indigenous North Americans tried to deal with the devastating pathogens. Changes to the Huron economy--a greater dependence on European trade goods, for example--allowed the Hurons to cope, for a time, with the epidemics. Likewise, the Hurons also restructured their political and cultural practices. However, no amount of cultural adaptation was able to change the course of contagious disease. Physically, the epidemics of the 1630 and 1640s took a great toll on the Hurons. Between 1634 and 1649, introduced diseases carried off at least half of the Huron population. Those who survived often experienced much physical discomfort and deprivation. The symptoms of measles, influenza, scarlet fever, and smallpox were physically taxing, not to mention alien to Indigenous experience. The high incidence of contagious disease usually meant that during epidemic outbreaks there were only a few healthy care-givers in each longhouse or village. As a result, not every ill person had sufficient amounts of food, water, or fire.

No Huron person was exempt from the physical toll that epidemic disease exacted. However, men and women experienced the physical effects of contagious disease differently. Measles, influenza, scarlet fever, and

smallpox increased maternal, prenatal, and perinatal (newborn) mortality. Additionally, each of the epidemics that invaded Huronia in the 1630s and 1640s clearly had a large impact on women's fertility and ability to lactate. Finally, the famines which accompanied epidemic disease, and consequently increased mortality, must have affected women and men differently. Women were responsible for procuring 85 per cent of the daily caloric intake. According to Huron mythology, women were responsible for the creation and nourishment of life. Clearly, the inability to create or sustain life had different consequences for Huron women than for men.

The role of women as mothers was an important one in Huron society. The ability to conceive was considered both powerful and mystical by Indigenous cultures. As feminist scholar Paula Gunn Allen points out:

[t]hrough their own bodies [women] could bring vital beings into the world--a miraculous power unrivaled by mere shamanic displays. They were mothers, and that word implied the highest degree of status in ritual cultures. The status of mother was so high, in fact, that in some cultures Mother or its analogue, Matron, was the highest office to which a man or woman could aspire.<sup>1</sup>

In many Indigenous cultures, it was the status of "mother," and not simply of "woman," that was important. Certainly, the onset of a young woman's menstrual cycle was a momentous event in most Indigenous societies. Among the Mohawks, a girl's first menstrual period required her to live apart from the rest of the village for a month.<sup>2</sup> Once women among such nations as the Petuns had regular menstrual periods, they were isolated in small huts

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<sup>1</sup> Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 28.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph-François Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Tribes*, William N. Fenton and Elizabeth L. Moore, eds., 2 volumes (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1974), 1:178.

during their monthly cycles.<sup>3</sup> Menstrual blood was considered very powerful, and even sacred, in Indigenous society. Menstruation was heavily tabooed. Traditionally, taboos developed to protect those, "who are weaker than the power itself, lest they suffer negative consequences from contact."<sup>4</sup>

Despite the power of menstrual blood, it was motherhood, and not simply a regular menstrual cycle, which conferred a higher status on Indigenous women. Among the Montagnais, married women who had not yet conceived were treated as children. The Jesuit Paul Le Jeune observed:

the young [Montagnais] women did not eat from the same dish as their husbands. I asked the reason and the Renegade told me that the young unmarried women, and the women who had no children, took no part in the management of affairs, and were treated like children.<sup>5</sup>

Childlessness affected Indigenous women in other ways as well. For example, the Hurons sometimes initiated divorce if no children were conceived within a marriage.<sup>6</sup> It is clear, then, that the attainment of motherhood was accompanied by a more powerful and more prominent role for women in Huron and other Indigenous cultures.

In the pre-contact era, children were desired and cherished. Huron children were never punished, and were loved, "above all things."<sup>7</sup> However, Huron families were actually quite small, with an average of only three children each. Trigger argues that the small number of children was

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel de Champlain, *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain, 1604-1618*, W. L. Grant, ed. (New York: Scribner, 1907), 304.

<sup>4</sup> Gunn Allen, *Sacred Hoop*, 28.

<sup>5</sup> Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed. *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, 73 volumes (New York: Pageant, 1959), 7:89.

<sup>6</sup> Conrad Heidenreich, *Huronian: A History and Geography of the Huron Indians, 1600-1650* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), 77.

<sup>7</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 6:153-5, 16:67.



primarily due to an extremely high infant mortality rate.<sup>8</sup> Contemporary European observers estimated that twenty-nine of every thirty Algonquian children died in infancy.<sup>9</sup> No European, however, recorded an estimate of Huron infant mortality. Heidenreich implies that Europeans noted the rate of infant death among the Algonquians because it was shockingly high. If the Hurons experienced a similar rate of infant mortality, Europeans probably would have mentioned it. Additionally, the diet and health of pre-contact Huron mothers was better than that of Algonquian hunter-gatherers. It seems safe to assume, then, that infant mortality in Huronia was "not serious during normal conditions." More likely, the small size of Huron families was due to sexual abstinence during pregnancy and breast-feeding.<sup>10</sup> Lafitau noted that Algonquian, Five Nations, and Huron men did not "live with their wives from the moment that they . . . declared themselves pregnant."<sup>11</sup> Among the Hurons, "a man . . . remain[ed] two or three years apart from his wife, while she [was] nursing."<sup>12</sup> Long periods of sexual abstinence combined with a relatively low life expectancy meant that a Huron woman could bear only a few children.

In general, pregnancy and childbirth were relatively easier in pre-contact Indigenous societies than in contemporary European societies. European men were shocked by the apparent ease with which Native women gave birth. The *Relations* are filled with accounts of women who delivered

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<sup>8</sup> Bruce G. Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660*, reprint (Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), 46.

<sup>9</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 1:257-9.

<sup>10</sup> Heidenreich, *Huronia*, 168.

<sup>11</sup> Lafitau, *Customs*, 1:339.

<sup>12</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 8:127.

their children quickly, and with ease, under arduous conditions. In 1639, Le Jeune wrote of a Montagnais woman who,

was delivered of a child all alone, and without the assistance of any one [*sic*]. She was confined in the morning, and at noon I saw her working. She had withdrawn into a miserable bark hut, which did not shelter her at all from the wind. Two days afterwards, she herself carried her child to Kebec to have it baptized . . . <sup>13</sup>

The apparent ease of giving birth in the St. Lawrence lowlands was a reflection of both physical conditions and cultural beliefs. In general, the physical health of Indigenous women was good. As Delâge states, "[Indigenous w]omen ate adequately and performed regular work that exercised all their muscles, that was diversified, and not excessively fatiguing." Indigenous babies were also quite small and easier to deliver. Culturally, Indigenous women held several advantages over their European counterparts. Among the Hurons, "maternity was not considered an illness, nor was sexuality considered a sin."<sup>14</sup> Additionally, however, nations such as the Mohawks believed that women who complained of labour pains gave birth to cowards. Although Indigenous women seemed to give birth easily, they were often pressured by their culture to "conquer their pains by an admirable force of will and abstain, insofar as it [was] within their power, from giving the least sign of weakness."<sup>15</sup>

In pre-contact times, Huron women were considered the creators of new life. By breast-feeding their children for at least two years, and by

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 16:107-9.

<sup>14</sup> Denys Delâge, *Bitter Feast: Amerindians and Europeans in Northeastern North America, 1600-64*, Jane Brierley, trans. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993), 68. Michael A. Weiner, *Earth Medicine, Earth Food: Plant Remedies, Drugs, and Natural Foods of the North American Indians* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1972), 11.

<sup>15</sup> Lafitau, *Customs*, 1:356.

producing most of the food necessary for survival, Huron women were also responsible for sustaining life. Once contact was established, however, the role Huron women played in the creation and nourishment of life was changed by the effects of contagious disease. The introduced epidemics affected fertility, lactation, and maternal, prenatal, and perinatal mortality. The power Huron women had to create and to sustain life declined after the arrival of Europeans and contagious disease.

The first epidemic, probably measles, spread to Huronia in the winter of 1634-5. Measles is extremely contagious. Young adults (ages fifteen to forty years) and infants are the most severely affected. Once a patient is infected with measles, the only treatment is supportive--controlling the fever and preventing the onset of secondary infections, for example. Death is usually not caused by measles itself, but by secondary infections, such as pneumonia or encephalitis (an inflammation of the brain). In the mid-twentieth century, the rate of mortality from measles was more severe among pregnant women than non-pregnant women. Measles also affected the rate of prenatal mortality. Women infected during the first trimester often spontaneously abort. An infection during the later trimesters does not usually result in miscarriage. However, measles may induce premature delivery.<sup>16</sup> Measles may also cause congenital malformations, such as cataracts, blindness, or mental disabilities.<sup>17</sup> The rigours of life in the seventeenth-century St. Lawrence lowlands were unfavourable for pre-term or disabled babies. Healthy babies born during the epidemic would not have fared well

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<sup>16</sup> George A. Nankervis, "Measles," in Avron Y. Sweet and Edwin G. Brown, eds., *Fetal and Neonatal Effects of Maternal Disease* (St. Louis: Mosby, 1991), 71-2.

<sup>17</sup> Ann Felice Ramenofsky, *Vectors of Death: The Archaeology of European Contact* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 146.

either. An infected mother could pass the disease to her child through the placenta.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, all newborns are "immunologically immature." As a result, babies cannot resist disease as effectively as adults.<sup>19</sup> In virgin soil populations, the inability of newborns to resist disease was indubitably catastrophic. It is clear that maternal, prenatal, and perinatal mortality was increased during the 1634-5 measles epidemic in Huronia.

Scarlet fever and influenza, present in Huronia during 1636-7, also increased maternal, fetal, and infant death. In 1637 the Jesuit François Le Mercier wrote:

there was a [Huron] woman outside whose end was drawing near; in fact, they found her lying upon some leaves and exposed to the heat of the sun. This poor woman had just been delivered, prematurely, of a dead child; it seemed as if she was only waiting for baptism, as she died the next day.<sup>20</sup>

Although it is clear that the woman was suffering from an contagious disease, Le Mercier does not identify it. Both influenza and scarlet fever affect maternal and infant mortality. Influenza increases maternal mortality by at least fifty per cent, primarily when secondary infections, such as pneumonia, are present.<sup>21</sup> Like measles, influenza may increase spontaneous abortions and cause congenital malformations of the fetus.<sup>22</sup> Again, physical and mental disabilities were major obstacles to infant survival in the seventeenth-century St. Lawrence lowlands.

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<sup>18</sup> Nankervis, "Measles," 72.

<sup>19</sup> Ruth A. Lawrence, *Breastfeeding: A Guide for the Medical Profession*, 4th ed. (St. Louis: Mosby, 1994), 150.

<sup>20</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 14:49.

<sup>21</sup> George A. Nankervis, "Influenza," in Avron Y. Sweet and Edwin G. Brown, eds., *Fetal and Neonatal Effects of Maternal Disease* (St. Louis: Mosby, 1991), 70.

<sup>22</sup> Martha Ann Auvenshine and Martha Enriquez, *Maternity Nursing: Dimensions of Change* (Monterey, California: Wadsworth, 1985), 245.

Scarlet fever is an acute contagious disease spread by direct contact or through infected droplets in the air. Symptoms include fever, nausea and vomiting, and a rash on the skin and tongue. Survivors of scarlet fever may suffer from secondary complications, which include pneumonia, acute or chronic nephritis, and permanent deafness. The treatment of scarlet fever is mainly supportive, and the primary concern is the prevention of dehydration. Among populations who have been previously exposed to scarlet fever, the disease is, "comparatively rare in infants but may occur in the new-born." Death may result from either the disease itself or from secondary infections.<sup>23</sup> While it is difficult to judge the impact the scarlet fever had in Huronia, and on Huron women in particular, it is clear that the disease caused physical hardship and death.

The smallpox epidemic which swept through Huronia in 1639 was devastating. Smallpox is extremely contagious. It is usually passed from person to person through droplets in the air.<sup>24</sup> However, smallpox may exist outside a host, in dried form, for several years. Therefore, smallpox may be spread by contaminated items--trade goods such as blankets, for example.<sup>25</sup>

The symptoms of smallpox include fever, headaches, vomiting, and skin lesions. There is no cure and the only treatment is supportive.<sup>26</sup> There are two forms of smallpox--*variola major* and *variola minor*. Of the two,

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<sup>23</sup> George F. Dick and Gladys Henry Dick, *Scarlet Fever* (Chicago: Year Book, 1938), 9, 42-5, 52-3, 83-4. Nephritis is an inflammation of the liver which may cause immediate death or may become a chronic condition.

<sup>24</sup> K. B. Roberts, *Smallpox: A Historic Disease*, Occasional Papers in Medical History, no. 1 (St. John's: Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1979), Introduction, n.p.

<sup>25</sup> Ramenofsky, *Vectors*, 147-8.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen M. Clark, *Smallpox and the Iroquois Wars: An Ethnographical Study of the Influence of the Demographic Change on Iroquoian Culture History, 1630-1700* (Salinas, California: Coyote Press, 1981), 32-3.

*variola major* is the more virulent.<sup>27</sup> even among populations which have been previously exposed to *variola major*, the mortality rate may be as high as fifty per cent.<sup>28</sup> Among virgin soil populations, however, approximately 75 per cent of those who contracted smallpox died.<sup>29</sup> Survivors were often left with debilitating secondary complications, including blindness.<sup>30</sup>

The impact of smallpox on Huron women, especially those who were pregnant, was harsh. Pregnant women experience more severe symptoms and die more frequently in smallpox epidemics than nonpregnant women or men. Both *variola major* and *variola minor* increase spontaneous abortions in the early months of pregnancy. In the final trimester, smallpox induces premature delivery. Many babies born during an epidemic inherit smallpox from their mothers. Infants born with a smallpox infection may die.<sup>31</sup> The Jesuits noted that some Huron babies died shortly after their mothers during the 1639 epidemic. Le Jeune mentioned two Huron women who died of smallpox and were "soon followed, each by a child they had left in the cradle."<sup>32</sup> Although congenital defects are rare among surviving infants, those which die *in utero* often suffer from severe congenital malformations.<sup>33</sup> The smallpox epidemic of 1639 severely affected the health and mortality of pregnant Huron women, their unborn children, and their newborn infants.

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<sup>27</sup> Roberts, *Historic Disease*, Introduction, n. p.

<sup>28</sup> James Barry Hanshaw, et al., eds. *Viral Diseases of the Fetus and Newborn*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1985), 175.

<sup>29</sup> Russell Thornton, *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History since 1492* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1972), 64.

<sup>30</sup> Adriaen Van der Donck, *A Description of the New Netherlands*, Thomas F. O'Donnell, ed. (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1968), 72-3.

<sup>31</sup> Hanshaw et al., *Viral Diseases*, 175-7.

<sup>32</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 19:221.

<sup>33</sup> Hanshaw et al., *Viral Diseases*, 178.

The widespread sickness and death caused by smallpox clearly affected fertility rates in Huronia. The high mortality rate of childbearing women lowered the birth rate not only for 1639, but also for years to come. The death of many Hurons between the ages of fifteen and forty years decreased the number of potential parents. Infants that died in the epidemic would never have children of their own. The death of children and the low fertility rates resulted in decreased numbers of future mothers and warriors. Additionally, smallpox may impair women's genital organs, preventing future full-term pregnancies.<sup>34</sup> Men's fertility is also affected by smallpox. Genital scars caused by smallpox "may have been a significant cause of infertility in male survivors."<sup>35</sup> Any epidemic may affect fertility by delaying marriage and lowering sexual desire.<sup>36</sup> Finally, among the Hurons, a strict three-year mourning period was enforced on widows.<sup>37</sup> Clearly, the epidemics of the 1630s had a huge impact on the ability of Huron women to create new life.

All four of the epidemic diseases in Huronia during the 1630s also affected women's ability to breast-feed. Infants were traditionally nursed until they reached the age of two or three.<sup>38</sup> Huron mothers supplemented their breast milk with solid foods, which they chewed up before feeding to their children. The Hurons, like many other Indigenous people, rarely allowed their babies to be wet-nursed. When a nursing mother died, her infant child would starve to death unless a wet nurse was found within her

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<sup>34</sup> Henry F. Dobyns, *Their Number Become Thinned: Native American Population Dynamics in Eastern North America* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), 14.

<sup>35</sup> Donald R. Hopkins, *Princes and Peasants: Smallpox in History* (University of Chicago Press, 1983), 5.

<sup>36</sup> Thornton, *Holocaust*, 54.

<sup>37</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 13:203-5.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:127.

maternal family. Occasionally, a Huron baby was kept alive by its father. Sagard wrote that one father fed his small child corn broth by passing it from his mouth to the baby's. In pre-contact Montagnais society, however, orphaned infants were killed so that they would not suffer the prolonged death of starvation.<sup>39</sup>

The epidemics of the 1630s had several negative consequences for nursing mothers and their babies. First, premature, weak, or ill babies often have difficulty sucking.<sup>40</sup> Second, ill mothers may be unable to hold their infants.<sup>41</sup> Third, the mothers' milk supply may be diminished due to malnutrition, dehydration, fatigue, or emotional stress. Ruth A. Lawrence, professor of pediatrics, obstetrics, and gynecology notes that "acute lactation failure (when women abruptly lose their milk) has been noted historically in times of great crises, fright, or accident."<sup>42</sup> The devastating sickness and death in 1630s Huronia probably provoked acute lactation failure in some nursing women. The inability to breast-feed a hungry child has emotional and physical consequences for mothers. Feelings of anxiety and insecurity can provoke lactation failure. And lactation failure, obviously, can provoke further feelings of anxiety. Therefore, a vicious cycle begins. This cycle eventually leads to the complete inability of the mother to produce breast milk.<sup>43</sup> In a society where wet nurses were rare and babies survived on

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 15:107, 19:71, 30:247; Gabriel Sagard, *Grand Voyage du Pays des Hurons* (Québec: Bibliothèque Québécoise, 1990), 206.

<sup>40</sup> Margaret Duncan Jensen, et al., *Maternity Care: The Nurse and the Family* (St. Louis: Mosby, 1977), 484.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas R. Berger, *A Long and Terrible Shadow: White Values, Native Rights in the Americas, 1492-1992* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1991), 32.

<sup>42</sup> Lawrence, *Breastfeeding*, 27-8, 280, 375.

<sup>43</sup> Auvenshine and Enriquez, *Maternity Nursing*, 389.



breast milk for approximately three years, lactation failure could lead directly to infant death.

Some Hurons born during the epidemics of the 1630s were able to breast-feed, if only for a time. A serious problem, however, was the passage of deadly pathogens from mother to child. Infants could become infected through droplets in the air. Healthy babies could contract the diseases while nursing.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, the epidemics also affected infants fortunate enough to have a wet nurse. In some cases, the baby's grandmother took over the role.<sup>45</sup> However, the wet nurses were also subjected to the devastation of the epidemics. The records of the Jesuits seem to indicate that there were too many orphaned infants and too few lactating women. In the midst of epidemic disease and famine in 1650, the Jesuits wrote:

[o]ne mother was visited, who had but her two breasts, and these dry and without milk,--which nevertheless, were the sole offering she had been able to make to three or four infants, who wept as they were pressed to her bosom. She beheld them die in her arms, one after another, and had not even the strength to cast them into the grave.<sup>46</sup>

It is clear that many Huron mothers were unable to care for their children during the epidemic cycle. In pre-contact society, women's power depended,

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<sup>44</sup> Lawrence, *Breastfeeding*, 173-4.

<sup>45</sup> Because Huron women became mothers (and grandmothers) at a relatively young age, it is possible that some grandmothers had nursing infants of their own, and, as a result, a ready supply of breast milk. However, women without nursing infants are able to produce breast milk, a "phenomenon sometimes termed 'non-puerperal induced lactation.'" With knowledge, stimulation by sucking, and confidence, women--even virginal women--and, more surprisingly, men can produce breast milk. See Derrick B. Jelliffe and E. F. Patrice Jelliffe, "Non-Puerperal Induced Lactation," *Pediatrics* 50, no. 1 (July 1972), 170-1. See also, G. J. Ebrahim, *Breast Feeding: The Biological Option* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 61.

<sup>46</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 19:71, 35:91-3.

to some extent, on their role as mothers. Therefore, the apparent inability of Huron women to create or sustain life during the epidemics must have had a tremendous impact on Huron women, both emotionally and culturally.

Modern western psychologists agree that the loss of an unborn or newborn infant has a terrible impact on both the mother and the father. Usually, the mother feels responsible for the death of her baby.<sup>47</sup> In extreme cases, the mother may have no desire to live, and may even contemplate suicide after the death of her infant child.<sup>48</sup> It is difficult to judge how accurately twentieth-century psychology reflects the situation in seventeenth-century Huronia. However, there is no doubt that Huron parents loved their children deeply. Le Jeune remarked in 1633 that the Hurons could not "bear to have their children punished, nor even scolded, [and were] not . . . able to refuse anything to a crying child." According to the Jesuits, the loss of a child was the only thing to evoke deep feelings among the Hurons. Le Jeune speculated that the death of an infant could cause the death of a bereaved mother. During the 1639 smallpox epidemic, Le Jeune noted that a Huron woman ". . . had a little child in heaven for a month past, which perhaps attracted its mother to that place . . ." Further, infant mortality was relatively low in pre-contact Huronia. Finally, the bodies of deceased infants were interred in a special manner. When children of less than two months of age died, the Hurons "inter[red] them on the road,--in order that, they say, if some woman passe[d] that way, they may secretly enter her womb, and that

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<sup>47</sup> James R. Woods and Jenifer L. Esposito, *Pregnancy Loss: Medical Therapeutics and Practical Considerations* (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1987), 14.

<sup>48</sup> Irving G. Leon, *When a Baby Dies: Psychotherapy for Pregnancy and Newborn Loss* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990), 43-4, 81.

she may give them life again, and bring them forth."<sup>49</sup> For these reasons, it is likely that the death of an infant in seventeenth-century Huronia was at least as traumatic as in twentieth-century western society.

The loss of any loved one, and not only of infant or stillborn babies, also has physiological repercussions for survivors. Physical problems that the recently bereaved experience include: lack of appetite and weight loss; general body pains such as headaches; dizziness, choking sensations, and shortness of breath; and menstrual irregularities. Studies show that there is a higher incidence of asthma, cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular disorders, and leukemia among people who recently lost a loved one. Further studies show that bereaved persons have a higher mortality rate than non-bereaved people in the same age bracket.<sup>50</sup> It has been proven that stress negatively affects the body's immune system, allowing pathogens to infect a person coping with grief and stress.<sup>51</sup> Further, the grief and stress Indigenous people suffered during epidemic outbreaks may have simply left them with no will to live. As McNeill explains,

[w]holesale demoralization and simple surrender of will to live certainly played a large part in the destruction of Amerindian communities. Numerous recorded instances of failure to tend newborn babies so that they died unnecessarily, as well as outright suicide, attest to the intensity of Amerindian . . . despair.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 6:153-5, 25:183, 10:273.

<sup>50</sup> Lewis R. Aiken, *Dying, Death and Bereavement*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1991), 249-50.

<sup>51</sup> K. David Patterson and Gerald W. Hartwig, eds. *Disease in African History: An Introductory Survey and Case Studies* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1978), 9.

<sup>52</sup> William McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 206.

The loss of loved ones indubitably had a huge physiological impact on Hurons. The stress and hopelessness experienced by survivors of the epidemics weakened them physically and emotionally, effectively causing more disease and death.

The famines which accompanied the epidemics of the 1630s also had a significant physical impact on Hurons, especially women. Delâge argues that famine was "unknown in [pre-contact] Huronia." The maize cultivated by women was usually sufficient to nourish the Huron population. Prior to the introduction of contagious diseases, the main cause of famine was extensive drought.<sup>53</sup> Once the epidemics spread to Huronia, however, it was impossible for sick women to tend to their fields. During the 1634 measles epidemic, Brébeuf wrote:

[The epidemic] has been so universal among the Savages of our acquaintance that I do not know if one has escaped its attacks. All these poor people have been much inconvenienced by it, particularly during the Autumn, as much in their fishing as in their harvesting. Many crops are lying beneath the snow; a large number of persons are dead . . . "<sup>54</sup>

During famines, as in times of plenty, Huron women were primarily responsible for sustaining their communities. When the stores of maize were insufficient to feed all of Huronia, women gathered roots, herbs, and acorns.<sup>55</sup> In addition to the procurement of food, Huron women were also responsible for its preparation.<sup>56</sup> During epidemics, the number of healthy women was too few to provide sufficient amounts of corn, gathered

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<sup>53</sup> Delâge, *Bitter Feast*, 46-7, 144.

<sup>54</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 8:87-9.

<sup>55</sup> Heidenreich, *Huronia*, 161.

<sup>56</sup> Lafitau, *Customs*, 2:60.

vegetables, or cooked food to sustain the entire Huron population. The most immediate physical consequence of famine was starvation and death.<sup>57</sup>

Famine also had a negative impact on the ability of Huron women to create life. First, by lowering sexual desire, famine decreases the number of conceptions and live births. Second, famine has catastrophic results for unborn babies. First-term fetuses exposed to famine experience a marked increase in stillbirths, death within the first week of life, low birth weight, and an increased risk of central nervous system disorders. Third trimester fetuses which survive famine usually have very low birth weights.<sup>58</sup> Small babies did not have much chance of surviving in seventeenth-century Huronia.<sup>59</sup> Famine effectively took away the mythic ability of Huron women to create and sustain life.

The physical impact of contagious disease on Huron women was tremendous. Women in Huronia, and particularly those who were pregnant, were often physically incapacitated or even killed by contagious diseases in the 1630s. Physical illness, miscarriage, the death of newborns, infertility, lactation failure, psychological and physiological effects of bereavement, and famine all took their toll on women's health. It is likely that the widespread disease and death affected women's roles in society. Prior to the epidemics, Huron women were considered the source of life. In many ways, it was the role of mother that gave women power and prestige in Huron society. During outbreaks of contagious disease, however, women were unable to fill

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<sup>57</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 35:91.

<sup>58</sup> Mervyn Susser and Zena Stein, "Prenatal Diet and Reproductive Loss," in Ian H. Porter and Ernest B. Hook, eds., *Human Embryonic and Fetal Death* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 184-5.

<sup>59</sup> Jensen, et al., *Maternity Care*, 175.

their role as mothers because they had little control over either the creation or nourishment of life.

## **Chapter Four**

### **The Political and Economic Impact of Epidemic Disease on Huron Women**

That the epidemics had far-reaching physical repercussions in seventeenth-century Huronia is unquestionable. However, the reverberations of the contagions extended far beyond physical distress. Virtually every aspect of Huron life was affected by contagious disease and the physical toll it exacted. Political processes, economic activities, and cultural practices were changed as the Hurons struggled to cope with the introduced pathogens. No Huron was exempt from the widespread changes caused by contagious disease. Like the physical consequences, however, the political and economic changes that stemmed from epidemic outbreaks affected Huron women differently than Huron men. Politically, women lost much of the power and prestige they had held in pre-contact society. The epidemics also affected women's role in the Huron economy. For example, in the 1640s, each woman had to work harder to maintain Huron participation in the fur trade at pre-epidemic levels. The Huron economy and political system were profoundly altered by contagious disease, and the changes proved particularly negative for women.

In pre-contact Huron society, women had a relatively large amount of political influence. Huron women attended general councils, addressed

general assemblies on occasion, and maintained the council fire.<sup>1</sup> It is true that most political positions were held by male elders. However, because Huron society was matrilineal, women played a decisive role in determining which men governed. The matrilineal practices of the Hurons were in stark contrast with contemporary patrilineal societies in Europe. However, Trigger argues that Huron society was also patrilineal at one time. Once they settled in the St. Lawrence region and became horticulturists, though, the Hurons became matrilineal for two main reasons. First, as the Huron country became more densely settled and game became more scarce, men were away from the villages hunting and fishing for increasingly longer periods of time. As a result, women were forced to deal with many day-to-day matters on their own. Additionally, however, a matrilineal culture may evolve when women play a dominant role as food producers. Because agricultural products fulfilled the vast majority of Huron subsistence needs, women's work was extremely valuable.<sup>2</sup> Horticulture directly contributed to the relative power and prestige of Huron women.

The physical ravages of the epidemics, however, greatly diminished the amount of influence Huron women were able to exert over political issues. Most important, the rampant deaths "tore gaping holes in the extensive web of clans and kinship " that was crucial to Huron politics.<sup>3</sup> Epidemic disease reduced extensive multi-generational families to one or two

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<sup>1</sup> For a fuller discussion of Huron women's pre-contact political power, see Chapter One.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce G. Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660*, reprint (Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), 54-5, 58, 135-6.

<sup>3</sup> James Axtell, *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 251.



members. A Huron man told the Jesuits during the 1639 smallpox epidemic that,

'... this cruel malady has now overrun all the cabins of our village, and has made such ravages in our own family that, lo, we are reduced to [two] persons, and I do not know yet whether we shall escape the fury of this Demon.'

The death of family members made it difficult for women to maintain their political influence. First, there were not as many potential leaders to choose among. Second, not all men who escaped epidemic death held the qualifications and experience esteemed in leaders. The epidemics left women, and indeed all Hurons, with no other choice but to accept unqualified men as their political leaders. During the 1639 smallpox outbreak, one such leader apologized for his participation in a general council: "My Brothers, you know well that I hardly ever speak except in our war councils, and that I concern myself only with affairs of arms; but I am obliged to speak here, since all the other Captains are dead."<sup>4</sup>

The epidemics had other political consequences. Although there is no record of Huron chiefs leaving their villages during epidemic cycles, Mohawk chiefs did. Van den Bogaert, a Dutch surgeon employed by the West India Company, traveled into the Mohawk country during the 1634 measles outbreak. In the first Mohawk village he visited, Van den Bogaert noticed that,

[n]one of the chiefs was at home except for the most principal one

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<sup>4</sup> Reuben Gold Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, 73 volumes (New York: Pagan, 1959), 15:43.

called [Adriochten], who was living one quarter mile from the fort in a small cabin because many Indians here in the castle had died of smallpox.<sup>5</sup>

It is possible that Huron chiefs also left their villages during epidemic cycles. Certainly, Hurons did leave their communities *en masse* when large numbers of people were infected with a contagious disease.<sup>6</sup> Further, it is probable that political issues were neglected when leaders were ill or not present. Epidemic disease likely slowed down the political process, in addition to affecting the quality of leadership.

Probably the most catastrophic effect of the epidemics on Huron political life was the onset of warfare with the Five Nations. Wars between the Five Nations and Hurons were not uncommon in pre-contact times. However, beginning in 1640, the wars between the Hurons and the Five Nations intensified. As Jérôme Lalemant wrote in 1642,

[t]he scourges of God have fallen, one after the other, upon this poor Barbarous People; the terror and dread of War have followed the fatal diseases which in previous years caused mourning and desolation everywhere.<sup>7</sup>

Warfare with the Five Nations was one of the main reasons the Huron Confederacy dispersed in 1649.

Warfare was a political issue in Iroquoian societies. Among the Mohawks, for example, "[t]he Council decide[d] on war only after considering the plan for a long time and weighing with mature consideration

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<sup>5</sup> Harmen Meyndertsz Van den Bogaert, *A Journey into Mohawk and Oneida Country, 1634-1635: A Journal of Harmen Meyndertsz Van den Bogaert*, Charles T. Gehring and William A. Starna, trans. and eds. (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988), xix, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 16:59.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 22:305.

all the factors pro and con. All the assemblies treat[ed] this matter."<sup>8</sup> In the pre-contact era, warfare between nations consisted primarily of small raiding parties. The usual objective of the war parties was to avenge the death of one of their people. However, Huron warriors seldom went into battle with the intention of killing their enemies. As in many other seventeenth-century Indigenous societies, the Hurons honoured warriors who brought back live prisoners.<sup>9</sup> Generally, war captives faced one of two fates. Occasionally, Iroquoians tortured and killed their war captives. However, prisoners were sometimes adopted by their captors.

The adoption of war captives was a traditional Iroquoian method of replacing deceased relatives. Lafitau wrote that "war [was] a necessary exercise for the Iroquois and Huron," primarily because it allowed the Iroquoians to capture and adopt prisoners. The adoption of prisoners was essential because,

the families . . . are sustained only by the number of those composing them, whether men or women. It is in their number that their main force and chief wealth consist. The loss of a single person is a great one, but one which must necessarily be repaired by replacing the person lacking by one or many others, according to the importance of him who is to be replaced.

Captives who were accepted into adoptive families were treated well. In fact, a male captive who replaced an important man became powerful himself, and, "[had] authority in the village if he [could] sustain by his own

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph-François Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Tribes*, William N. Fenton and Elizabeth L. Moore, eds., 2 volumes (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1974), 1:168.

<sup>9</sup> Cornelius J. Jaenen, *Friend and Foe: Aspects of French-Amerindian Cultural Contact in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), 127, 134.

personal merit the name which he [took]." Young female captives, particularly those accepted into a family without fecund women, were considered a stroke of good fortune. When such a woman was adopted, "[a]ll the hope of the family [was] placed in this captive who [became] mistress of this family and the branches dependent on it."<sup>10</sup> In the pre-contact era, both the Hurons and the Five Nations adopted small numbers of war captives. However, once the post-epidemic warfare escalated, the Five Nations began adopting captives on a massive scale. It is estimated that the Five Nations adopted thousands of war captives between 1640 and 1650, many of whom were Huron.<sup>11</sup> As George T. Hunt points out in his classic study, *The Wars of the Iroquois*, ". . . as early as 1656 a priest found that there were more foreigners than natives in Iroquoia, [with] eleven different nations being represented in the country of the Seneca."<sup>12</sup>

Some scholars believe that the wars between the Hurons and the Five Nations were economically motivated. Scholars theorize that the Five Nations sought two main economic goals by warring with the Hurons during the 1640s. The first was the acquisition of Huronia's hunting territory. The second was the usurpation of the Hurons' role as middlepeople in the fur trade.<sup>13</sup> However, it is unlikely the Five Nations wanted Huronia as a

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<sup>10</sup> Lafitau, *Customs*, 2:99, 171-2.

<sup>11</sup> Stephan M. Clark, *Smallpox and the Iroquois Wars: An Ethnographical Study of the Influence of the Demographic Change on Iroquoian Culture History, 1630-1700* (Salinas, California: Coyote Press, 1981), 3.

<sup>12</sup> George T. Hunt, *The Wars of the Iroquois: A Study in Intertribal Relations* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1940), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Johnston, "Epidemics: The Forgotten Factor in Seventeenth Century Native Warfare in the St. Lawrence Region," in Bruce Alden Cox, ed., *Native People, Native Lands: Canadian Indians, Inuit and Metis* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1988), 15.

hunting territory. Beaver was virtually extinct in the Huron country by 1630. Likewise, the role of middlemen held by the Hurons was not exceptional. The Five Nations, particularly the Mohawks, acted as middlemen in the trade with the Dutch. Delâge argues that the Dutch offered their trade goods to the Mohawks at lower prices than the French offered theirs to the Hurons. As well, the Dutch were willing to trade much-coveted firearms for fur, which the French were reluctant to do.<sup>14</sup> There were few, if any, significant economic advantages for the Five Nations to gain through warfare with the Hurons.

The argument that the Five Nations instigated warfare over economic concerns tends to overlook the fact that seventeenth-century Indigenous societies generally did not trade solely out of economic considerations. As Heidenreich argues,

[t]he motives behind Huron trade were not dictated by economic need, except in times of famine. Huron traders regarded their journeys as an adventure, and their gains as a means of achieving prestige and social status. Success in trade or war were ways of gaining recognition and therefore political influence.<sup>15</sup>

William N. Fenton, as quoted by fellow historian Karl Schlesier, puts it differently: "The image of the Iroquois as 'economic man' or even as 'middleman' has never appealed to me as being at all consistent with his character or his culture."<sup>16</sup> Personal economic gain was not important in pre-contact Indigenous society. Many trade goods were shared or given

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<sup>14</sup> Denys Delâge, *Bitter Feast: Amerindians and Europeans in Northeastern North America, 1600-64*, Jane Brierley, trans. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993), 126-30.

<sup>15</sup> Conrad Heidenreich, *Huron: A History and Geography of the Huron Indians, 1600-1650* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), 163.

<sup>16</sup> Karl H. Schlesier, "Epidemics and Indian Middlemen: Rethinking the Wars of the Iroquois, 1609-1653," *Ethnohistory* 23, no. 2 (Spring 1976), 133-4.

away. As Anderson points out, "[i]t seems most unlikely, given the communal nature of a Huron longhouse, that goods as useful as kettles, axes and knives could have been kept under the control of a single individual for very long . . ."<sup>17</sup> It is true that the Indigenous people of the St. Lawrence region sought European trade goods, especially metal tools. However, Indigenous people did not seek the goods purely for commercial reasons. The goods also had cultural significance, and were used in redistribution ceremonies, such as the Feast of the Dead. As Trigger states, the Hurons, "viewed [trade goods] as a means of realizing the traditional values of their society."<sup>18</sup> Because economic gain in itself was not important to Indigenous societies, it is unlikely that economic considerations were the primary motives of the Five Nations during the warfare of the 1640s.

It is more likely that the Five Nations initiated warfare as a direct response to epidemic disease. It is true that the dispersal of the Hurons and the desertion of Huronia were significant side effects of the warfare, effects which were clearly beneficial to the Five Nations. Nevertheless, the devastation caused by epidemic disease was a crucial factor in the Five Nations' decision to war with the Hurons. In 1645, the Five Nations and the Hurons treated for peace.<sup>19</sup> Within a year, that peace was shattered when the Mohawks killed the Jesuit Isaac Jogues. The Five Nations justified the death of Jogues by pointing out that the priest caused epidemic disease in the Mohawk country. Hunt offers a summation of the story:

Jogues had left among the Iroquois [in 1645] a little black box

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<sup>17</sup> Karen Lee Anderson, *Chain Her by One Foot: The Subjugation of Native Women in Seventeenth-Century New France* (London: Routledge, 1991), 150.

<sup>18</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 426-9.

<sup>19</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 27:293.

containing ritual material, and they thought that a disease which had broken out later, and worms that had infested their corn, were the result of magic worked by him with that little black box.

Hunt argues that it is "not only unlikely but practically impossible" that the Five Nations would war with the Hurons, the Algonquins, and the French over Jogues's "little black box."<sup>20</sup> However, epidemic disease provided the Five Nations with two motives for warfare. First, in the pre-contact era, raiding parties were primarily formed to avenge the death of a loved one. The high mortality that accompanied epidemics certainly could have spurred the Five Nations to seek vengeance. While Jogues alone was responsible for leaving his black box in the Mohawk country, all the Jesuits, as well as those who harboured the priests, were indirectly responsible for spreading epidemic disease. Second, Iroquoian people traditionally sought war captives to replace their deceased relatives, whatever the cause of death. The deaths exacted by epidemic disease provided traditional Iroquoian motives for warfare.

Scholars such as Johnston, Schlesier, Stephan Clark, and Daniel Richter theorize that the most important goal of post-epidemic Five Nations raiding parties was the seizure of captives. As Clark points out,

[t]he Five Nations gradually became more aware of prisoner adoption as a practical alternative for death as Iroquoian warfare itself escalated after 1640. During the Iroquois Wars from 1649 to 1654 and for the next 25 years thereafter, the Iroquois sought to capture and adopt as many of the defeated Indians as possible.<sup>21</sup>

Reports of contemporary Europeans support the theory that Five Nations raiding parties primarily sought captives. The Jesuit Superior Barthélemy

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<sup>20</sup> Hunt, *Wars*, 84-5.

<sup>21</sup> Clark, *Smallpox and Wars*, 29.

Vimont understood the aim of the Five Nations' warfare. In 1642, Vimont wrote:

[t]he design of the Iroquois, as far as I can see, is to take, if they can all the Hurons; and having put to death the most considerable ones and a good part of the others, to make them both but one people and one land.<sup>22</sup>

The tremendous population losses in Iroquoia during the 1630s prompted Five Nations warriors to seek captives to repopulate their country.

Like the Hurons, the Five Nations lost at least half their pre-contact population to contagious disease.<sup>23</sup> Trigger argues that it is unlikely the Five Nations would have risked losing their surviving men in warfare simply to capture Hurons.<sup>24</sup> However, the benefits of warfare with the Hurons outweighed the risks to Five Nations warriors. As Johnston points out, a single skirmish sometimes produced hundreds of Huron captives. In comparison, there is no evidence the Hurons captured or killed a comparable number of Iroquois. Johnston argues that the lack of evidence may be due to the biases of the Jesuits. After all, the rout of Christian Huronia would have garnered sympathy (and hence financial support) in France. However, in the immediate post-epidemic period, other Indigenous groups also warred with the Five Nations. Like the Hurons, no other nation was able to seize a large number of Iroquois captives. For example, when a group of Montagnais attacked 300 Iroquois, twenty-eight Iroquois were killed and only five were captured.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the Hurons dispersed in 1649 largely because they

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<sup>22</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 24:297.

<sup>23</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 602.

<sup>24</sup> Bruce G. Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers: Canada's "Heroic Age" Reconsidered* (Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985), 260.

<sup>25</sup> Johnston, "Forgotten Factor," 24-7.



did not have the manpower necessary to repel Iroquois attacks. It is clear, then, that the Hurons were not as successful in repopulating their country as the Five Nations were. For these reasons, it seems likely that in Iroquoia, the number of captives more than compensated for the few warriors lost in battle.

In the 1640s, Five Nations warriors took care to expose themselves to little risk. In Huronia, Iroquois raiding parties largely focused on taking female captives. Iroquois warriors deliberately surprised Huron women in situations where few men were present--while women were at work in the fields, for example. In the spring of 1646, Five Nations men,

surrounded a company of [Huron] women who were just going out for work in the fields, and so quickly carried them off in their canoes, that two hundred men in arms, who ran up at their first cries, could not arrive soon enough to save one of them, but were only in time to witness the sad tears of their wives, their mothers, and their children, who were taken captive.<sup>26</sup>

The Five Nations policy of capturing women did not expose Iroquois warriors to great risk. And it was women who were most highly desired as captives. As Lafitau pointed out,

... the old men who would have trouble in learning their language or whom age would render useless, the chiefs, and important men among the warriors from whom they would have something to fear if they escaped, the children of too tender age, and the infirm who would be too heavy a burden on their route ... [were often killed] before leaving the village.<sup>27</sup>

Primarily, Five Nations warriors took Huron women captive, "in order to keep up the population of their own [Iroquois] villages."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 29:249.

<sup>27</sup> Lafitau, *Customs*, 2:145.

<sup>28</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 36:177.

Clark argues that the integration of female captives into Five Nations villages had several positive effects for the captors. First, survivors of epidemics gained immunity to subsequent outbreaks of the same disease. As a result, the level of tribal immunity increased greatly through the adoption of epidemic survivors. Second, captives replaced those who died in epidemic outbreaks or the accompanying warfare, which kept the population relatively stable. Third, by bolstering their population base, the Five Nations deflected future population losses due to epidemics and warfare.<sup>29</sup> Finally, through captive adoption, the Five Nations alleviated the societal disruptions caused by epidemic death. Adopted captives could fill important positions, perform rituals (such as funerals), and contribute specialized skills, thereby perpetuating Iroquoian culture. In the immediate aftermath of the epidemics, the adoption of war captives was clearly beneficial for the Five Nations.

Warfare between the Hurons and Five Nations groups, as well as the concomitant adoption of Huron war captives by the Five Nations, clearly had several negative consequences for Huron women. First, on-going warfare required men to leave their villages for long periods of time. Further, not all male captives were adopted by the captors. Many male captives were ritually killed by Five Nations warriors. Therefore, there were increasingly fewer Huron men to perform traditionally male tasks, which included the defense of Huronia. As a result, Huron women were subjected to Five Nations raiding parties more and more frequently.<sup>30</sup>

Second, Huron women were negatively affected by warfare because the Five Nations increasingly sought women as captives. Occasionally, Five

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<sup>29</sup> Clark, *Smallpox and Wars*, 7-8.

<sup>30</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 34:87.

Nations warriors would take several hundred women captive during a single raid. Mothers of young children, in particular, had difficulty escaping Iroquois raids. Women carrying or herding young children could not run or hide quickly. Additionally, the cries of young children sometimes gave away the location of their mothers.<sup>31</sup>

Some Huron women taken captive were killed by the Five Nations. In 1644, the Jesuits reported that, "[n]early everyday, unfortunate [Huron] women were killed in their fields."<sup>32</sup> However, female captives were usually prized, and were rarely killed. Instead, as Van der Donck noted, Five Nations warriors,

seldom destroy[ed] women and children [in war], unless it [was] in their first fury, but never afterwards. If it [was] in their power, they carr[ied] them all with them to their own abode. The women they treat[ed] as their own, to strengthen their nation.<sup>33</sup>

Huron women were valued as prisoners not only for their reproductive abilities, but also for their potential as marriage partners.<sup>34</sup>

A third negative effect of warfare and captive adoption on Huron women was the resulting famine. Times of famine were frequent and severe during the years of warfare with the Five Nations. The Jesuits reported large-scale famine in Huronia during 1643-4, 1648-9, and 1649-50.<sup>35</sup> Probably, fear of raiding parties prevented Huron women from working in their fields during the 1640s. Existing corn surpluses were insufficient to

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 34:93.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 26:225, 27:63-5.

<sup>33</sup> Adriaen Van der Donck, *A Description of the New Netherlands*, Thomas F. O'Donnell, ed. (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1968), 99.

<sup>34</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 22:265-7, 30:277.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 27:65, 33:259, 35:21.

sustain the Huron population through years of famine.<sup>36</sup> Famine necessitated that Huron women supplement the meager food supply by gathering roots and herbs. During the 1643-4 famine, the Jesuits noted that,

[m]any [Hurons] lived on a kind of acorn, on pumpkins, and on paltry roots which they often went to seek very far away, in places where they were exposed to massacre and which were covered only with the enemies' tracks.<sup>37</sup>

Huron women entered a vicious circle. Afraid of capture while working in their fields, Huron women sought gathered foods, which exposed them to raiding parties. Huron women were unable to break out of this cycle, which ultimately resulted in hunger, as well as the possibility of capture or death.

The impact of contagious disease on the Huron economy did not affect women as severely as the changes to Huronia's political system. Primarily, contagious disease increased the amount of work performed by each woman. The fur trade depended on women's labour. Women produced corn, which was the main trade good of the Hurons, as well as the main source of food for Huron men traversing the trade routes or following the hunt. Additionally, Huron women prepared the skins which were traded to the French.<sup>38</sup> As Davis states, the fur trade "multipli[ed] a hundredfold the movement of beaver pelts out of the forests, through the women's hands, and into wooden boats bound for Europe."<sup>39</sup> Despite the massive population loss to epidemic disease, however, the amount of fur the Hurons traded to the French did not decline in the aftermath of the epidemics.<sup>40</sup> That the volume

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<sup>36</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 753-5.

<sup>37</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 27:65.

<sup>38</sup> Delâge, *Bitter Feast*, 161.

<sup>39</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 89.

<sup>40</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 603. Heidenreich explains that although the Huron population

of trade did not decrease is also surprising because the Hurons were often too sick to travel. During the 1636-7 epidemic cycle, the Jesuit Pierre Pijart informed Le Jeune that "the epidemic continued its ravages among the Hurons, and had caused several, who were coming to trade with the French to turn back . . ." Finally, Hurons who were not ill spent much of their time searching for remedies, preparing food, and caring for the ill.<sup>41</sup> The Hurons, then, continued to trade large quantities of fur despite large-scale death and ill or weak survivors. To maintain the pre-epidemic levels of trade, each Huron woman's work load must have increased dramatically.

Other economic changes stemmed from the epidemic cycles. For example, the deaths of many people, aged fifteen to forty years, created a shortage of skilled labour. As early as 1640, the Jesuits realized that "the extraordinary diseases and the wars in some years past seem to have carried off the best portion [of the Hurons]: there remaining only a very few old men, very few persons of skill and management."<sup>42</sup> The shortage of workers probably decreased the amount of certain goods (such as pottery) that were available in post-epidemic Huronia. As well, the amount of labour women had to perform to survive almost certainly increased. A large population may support a number of specialists who provide each other with necessary

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decreased during the 1630s and 1640s, the Huron trade network expanded. Heidenreich attributes the expansion to three factors. First, the Nippissings ceased to trade directly with the French, and preferred to trade with Huron middlemen. Second, the collapse of Ottawa nations, such as the Allumettes and the Petites, allowed the Hurons to expand their trade base. Third, the Christian Hurons who settled at Sillery were near the French at Québec, Trois-Rivières, and Tadoussac, and these Hurons continued to trade with the Montagnais. Heidenreich, *Huronia*, 267, 276-7.

<sup>41</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 12:227, 13:221.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 19:127.

goods. In a smaller population, however, each person must be more self-reliant, and her work must be of a more general nature.

Epidemic disease also affected women's role in the Huron economy by increasing the Hurons' reliance on European goods and French charity. Trigger argues that the Hurons, unlike the Montagnais, never became fully dependent on European trade goods for survival.<sup>43</sup> However, it is likely that the Hurons relied on French goods during the 1630s and 1640s to some extent. As Fenton points out, the loss of half the population resulted in a shortage of labourers in post-epidemic Huronia. Any trade goods would have helped to sustain the Hurons.<sup>44</sup> And, although the Hurons may not have been dependent on French trade goods, they became increasingly dependent on French charity. In times of sickness and famine, the Jesuits dispensed medicine and food. During warfare with the Five Nations, the Hurons relied on French military protection.<sup>45</sup> By 1649, those Hurons who traveled to Gahoendoe, an island to the west of Huronia in the Georgian Bay, relied heavily on the Jesuits for survival.<sup>46</sup> By relying on French charity to fulfill their subsistence needs, the Hurons negated the role of women as sustainers of life. Once Huron women were no longer necessary for the survival of the Huron population, they lost a tremendous amount of power. Much of the power Huron women enjoyed was a direct result of their control of agricultural production and the food supply. Additionally, much of the prestige of Huron women was a result of their role the nurturers of life. The

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<sup>43</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 361-2.

<sup>44</sup> William N. Fenton, "Huron: An Essay in Proper Ethnohistory," *American Anthropologist* 80, no. 4 (December 1978), 931.

<sup>45</sup> Anderson, *Chain Her*, 209.

<sup>46</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 35:99.

usurpation of this role by the Jesuits could have only had negative consequences for Huron women.

The increased dependence on French charity had further negative consequences for Huron women. The Jesuits did not offer an equal amount of charity to all needy Hurons. Instead, the best charitable goods were given to those Hurons who adhered most closely to French and Christian principles. Christianity carried many negative consequences for Indigenous women. Traditionally, Christianity deemed women naturally inferior to men, which justified the subordination of Christian women to men. Nevertheless, in order to survive, some Hurons chose to adopt Christianity and to practice Christian beliefs. The need for charity necessitated the endorsement of Christianity. And Christianity endorsed the subordination of women to men.<sup>47</sup>

Epidemic disease had several wide-ranging and negative effects on the role women played in Huronia's political system and economy. The control women wielded over Huronia's political succession was greatly diminished by contagious disease. The quality of political leadership declined, leaving unqualified and inexperienced men at the head of Huronia's political system. Warfare, which the Five Nations initiated in response to the massive population losses, resulted in captivity or death for many Huron women. Women's work load increased dramatically in the aftermath of epidemic disease. Finally, the inability of Huron women to feed their families in the face of extreme famine increased the Hurons' dependence on French charity.

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* Christianity and its effect on Huron women will be discussed more fully in Chapter Five.

The impact of epidemic disease on Huronia's political and economic structures was largely negative for Huron women.



## **Chapter Five**

### **The Cultural Impact of Epidemic Disease on Huron Women**

Huronian was subjected to rampant cultural change in the aftermath of epidemic disease. Most cultural changes had negative consequences for Huron women. In pre-contact Huronia, women were crucial to the perpetuation of culture. As mothers and grandmothers, women participated in cultural activities, demonstrating the viability of the Huron culture to young people. However, widespread illness and death affected women's social roles--roles such as mothers, wives, and elders. Additionally, Huron women were key participants in cultural activities such as curing ceremonies and funeral rites. Epidemic disease did not always permit Huron women to fulfill their cultural obligations. Finally, the inability to halt contagious disease and death forced the Hurons to re-evaluate their traditional beliefs and practices. Traditional beliefs which could not stop the spread of contagious diseases were changed or abandoned. New beliefs, such as Christianity, were instituted. Because the power and prestige of Huron women were rooted in tradition, the loss of traditional beliefs affected women deeply.

The widespread physical suffering and death caused by epidemic disease altered the social roles of Huron women. As explained in Chapter Three, epidemic disease produced a high infant and maternal mortality rate, as well as lactation failure, infertility, and famine. As a result, contagious

diseases decreased the ability of Huron women to fulfill their role as mothers. The role of wife was also affected by contagious disease. The epidemics and accompanying warfare left in their wake, "hundreds and hundreds of [Huron] widows."<sup>1</sup> The traditional mourning period in Huronia was three years. The Jesuits noted that if a widow remarried within three years of her husband's death,

without the permission of the dead man's relatives, they not only bear her ill-will, but they plunder her husband if they meet him; and this custom has so passed for law that we have seen it practiced before our eyes, in such a way that the one who had thus married saw his [p]orcelain [c]ollars and all he had, taken without saying anything else except that it was he who had injured himself by having infringed upon their custom.<sup>2</sup>

The high male mortality rates and the rigid mourning restrictions made it difficult for Huron women to fulfill the role of wife.

As discussed in Chapter One, men were vital to the survival of Huronia. In particular, Huron men were responsible for providing shelter and defense. The large number of men who died during epidemic outbreaks, as well as during the accompanying warfare and famine, placed the Huron Confederacy at serious risk. Huronia's physical and emotional well-being was further endangered by the number of men who committed suicide in the face of epidemic disease. Psychologist Lewis R. Aiken argues that "all kinds of people kill themselves and for a variety of reasons, . . . [such as] the death of a loved one; loneliness; feelings of guilt; . . . [and] chronically poor

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<sup>1</sup> Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, 73 volumes (New York: Pageant, 1959), 34:215-17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 16:203-5.

health and physical pain."<sup>3</sup> In Huronia, epidemic disease produced many of the motives for suicide that Aiken describes. There is no evidence that Huron women took their own lives in response to the devastation of the epidemics. The Jesuits mention some Huron men, however, who attempted or committed suicide. One man took his own life after his son was killed in warfare with the Five Nations. Other Huron men committed suicide because they contracted a contagious disease and believed that death by contagion was prolonged, painful, and certain.<sup>4</sup> The suicidal deaths of fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons had a negative impact on the physical and emotional well-being of Huron women.

Women's welfare in Huron society was further affected by the death of many elders from epidemic disease. One Huron lamented to the Jesuits that since the introduction of contagious diseases, "one sees no more white heads,--we die at half age."<sup>5</sup> Older men, who traditionally occupied the most prestigious political offices, died, leaving behind incompetent and inexperienced successors. Older people, in general, were responsible for maintaining and propagating specialized knowledge and Huron culture. Many people died before they passed their knowledge to the next generation.<sup>6</sup> The loss of knowledge and traditions unique to Huronia allowed foreign traditions to take root. For example, in 1646, a Huron man, asked to speak of the beginning of the world, related the Christian creation

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis R. Aiken, *Dying, Death and Bereavement*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1991), 76.

<sup>4</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 13:27, 18:29, 19:169-71.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 25:37.

<sup>6</sup> Denys Del  ge, *Bitter Feast: Amerindians and Europeans in Northeastern North America, 1600-64*, Jane Brierley, trans. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993), 88.

myth rather than the Huron myth.<sup>7</sup> Much of the power Huron women held was reflected in the story of Aataentsic. In comparison, the Christian creation myth portrayed women as responsible for the Fall of mankind. The refusal to recognize the mythic role of Huron women in the creation undermined the importance of women in Huron society and culture.

The rampant deaths which accompanied epidemic disease also affected women's social status by demolishing the Huron kinship structure. The dissolution of kinship ties meant that women were unable to rely on kin to fulfill traditional obligations. For example, in the pre-contact era, Huron men were obligated to share part of the hunt with their wives, their daughters, their mothers, and their sisters.<sup>8</sup> Once epidemic disease swept through Huronia, the number of people women could rely on was greatly diminished. The smallpox epidemic of 1639, for example, left a Huron woman, "robbed of all her children, the sole support of her old age."<sup>9</sup> Without large extended families, Huron women lost some of their social status. For example, family size determined the desirability of young people as marriage partners. Lafitau realized that among the Indigenous people of the St. Lawrence lowlands, "[s]ome households [were] shunned [when choosing marriage partners] because they [were] not very numerous and [were] consequently poor and held in small esteem . . ."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 30:61.

<sup>8</sup> Karen Lee Anderson, "Huron Women and Huron Men: The Effects of Demography, Kinship, and the Social Division of Labour on Male/Female Relations among the Seventeenth-Century Huron" (Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Toronto, 1983), 168.

<sup>9</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 19:221.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph-François Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Tribes*, William N. Fenton and Elizabeth L. Moore, eds., 2 volumes (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1974), 1:341.

Small extended family size also affected women's social status because small families did not have the resources to participate in sharing rituals. Generosity was a crucial facet of Huron social life. Prestige was earned in Huronia by sharing possessions without reserve. To a large extent, generosity hinged on women's work. The corn which women grew was shared out among community members, or it was traded for goods which were shared or given away. Generosity directly increased women's social status. As Trigger states, "[w]omen sought public approval by looking after their families and guests well."<sup>11</sup> Because women's social status depended, to some extent, on their generosity, the decreasing family size in Huronia likely reduced the social prestige of some women.

Illness, famine, and widespread death also affected the ability of Huron women to participate in traditional rituals. Huron women were essential participants in curing ceremonies and funeral rites. At curing ceremonies, Huron women accepted presents for the ill person, danced, sang, or engaged in sexual intercourse.<sup>12</sup> Women were also integral participants in funeral rites. Funerals were the "most sacred and solemn" ceremonies of the Hurons. As soon as a Huron died, the body was wrapped in the deceased's best robe and arranged on a sleeping mat. All the members of the village were informed of the death. Each Huron prepared the best feast she could, and divided it all into portions for relatives and friends, in order to celebrate the Feast of Souls.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Bruce G. Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660*, reprint (Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), 50.

<sup>12</sup> Karen Lee Anderson, *Chain Her by One Foot: The Subjugation of Women in Seventeenth-Century New France* (London: Routledge, 1991), 120; Thwaites, *Relations*, 41:141; Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 83.

<sup>13</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 39:29; Gabriel Sagard, *Le Grand Voyage du Pays des Hurons*

On the day of the funeral, everyone gathered at the cabin of the deceased. Before the body was removed, all the women and girls cried and lamented together. Huron men were able to express their sorrow only through sad facial expressions. When the body was transported to its platform, all the deceased's friends and family went along.<sup>14</sup> During the ceremony at the grave site, "the mother or the wife [was] at the foot of the grave calling to the deceased with singing." Women continued to express their grief through song for weeks after the death of a loved one.<sup>15</sup> Mourners blackened their faces with charcoal and often forgot to eat. Widows, "no longer adorn[ed] themselves, or bathe[d] or anoint[ed] themselves, but with disheveled hair, punctiliously observe[d] a sullen silence." Widows mourned for three years, but the extent of their mourning was controlled by their mothers. Mothers could order their widowed daughters to bathe, to oil their hair, and even to attend feasts.<sup>16</sup>

Women were also important participants in the Feast of the Dead, a ceremony held in each Huron village every ten to twelve years. Bodies of the deceased were not buried, but left on raised platforms outside Huron villages. Feasts of the Dead were held before a village relocated. In preparation for the Feasts, the bodies were removed from their platforms, and the bones were cleaned and washed by the women of the village. The cleaned bones were wrapped in fine furs and interred in a large trench (ossuary) along with the bones of other deceased Hurons from the same

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(Québec: Bibliothèque Québécoise, 1990), 289.

<sup>14</sup> Sagard, *Grand Voyage*, 290-1.

<sup>15</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 10:271, 39:29.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 29:285, 39:29, 10:275; Lafitau, *Customs*, 2:222.

village.<sup>17</sup> Poles were used to mix together all the bones, symbolizing that the Hurons "belonged to one another in death as in life."<sup>18</sup>

Epidemic disease affected women's ability to participate fully in funeral rites and mourning rituals. Occasionally, the warfare which accompanied epidemic disease required women to disregard their mourning. During the 1636-7 epidemic cycle, for example,

[t]he Captain *Andahiach* made a round of all the cabins, and in a loud voice exhorted the women to take courage and not to allow themselves to be cast down with sorrow on account of the death of their relatives; and that, when the young men should come to bring them some hemp to spin, they should willingly render them this little service . . .

Hemp was used to make weapons, and was crucial in warfare with the Five Nations.<sup>19</sup> The well-being of the Huron nation, then, took precedence over mourning restrictions. By not properly mourning their loved ones during the 1630s and 1640s, Huron women were unable to take care of their people in death, just as they had had difficulty caring for them during life.

Ultimately, severe outbreaks of epidemic disease led to a loss of faith in traditional beliefs. McNeill argues that,

[t]he disruptive effect of such an epidemic is likely to be greater than the mere loss of life, as severe as that may be. Often survivors are demoralized, and lose all faith in inherited custom and belief which had not prepared them for such a disaster.<sup>20</sup>

The Hurons, too, suffered from a loss of faith in their traditions. During epidemic outbreaks, shamans were incapable of halting or predicting the end

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<sup>17</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 39:31.

<sup>18</sup> Henry Warner Bowden, *American Indians and Christian Missions: Studies in Cultural Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 72.

<sup>19</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 13:265.

<sup>20</sup> William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 69.

of rampant sickness and death. During the 1636-7 epidemic, one Huron shaman predicted that,

no more than five of them would die, and that the sickness would cease at the end of nine days; and yet before the [Jesuit] Father's departure, there were ten dead, and since then more than 50; and on 4th of January . . . there were nearly as many sick people as usual, and yet it was the 13th day after this fine [p]rophecy.

The shaman who made this incorrect prediction was greatly discredited, and, "his whole practice was reduced to a single cabin, in which he himself was sick."<sup>21</sup> Healers also lost much credibility during epidemic outbreaks. Two of the most prestigious shamans in Huronia, for example, "lost a great deal of their credit with the sick of other villages; and . . . they [became] more than ever discomfited, seeing that their sweat, feasts, potions, and ordinances [were] of no avail with their countrymen."<sup>22</sup>

The decreasing faith in shamans was partly the result of the Jesuits' work. The missionaries clearly understood that in order for Christianity to flourish among the Hurons, shamans had to be discredited and displaced. As a result,

[i]n order to undermine the shaman's authority, the missionary called into question his ability to cure the sick with traditional medicine, claiming that prayers and Catholic rites, including baptism, were more effective, even on the physical plain. The missionary thereby assumed the role of shaman and threw down the gauntlet.<sup>23</sup>

Partly due to the efforts of the Jesuits, and partly due to the tremendous physical suffering caused by the epidemics, the Hurons acknowledged that traditional remedies were ineffective in the face of contagious disease. In an

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<sup>21</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 13:213-15.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 14:51.

<sup>23</sup> Delâge, *Bitter Feast*, 170.



effort to halt contagious disease and death, the Hurons sought new medical procedures, new shamanic rites, and ultimately, new traditions. Without their own traditional beliefs, the Hurons were left with a cultural void. In an attempt to fill the cultural gaps left by contagious disease, some Hurons turned to the French, the Jesuits, and Christianity.

The first missionaries to spread the Christian message to the Huron country were members of the Récollet order. From 1615 to 1626, the Récollets preached in the country of the Hurons. However, discouraged by their lack of success, the Récollets invited the Jesuits to Huronia. The first Jesuits arrived in the Huron country in 1626.<sup>24</sup> At first, the Jesuits also had very little success in urging the Hurons to accept Christianity. By 1640, the Jesuits counted only 1,000 Huron converts. At least 460 of these newly converted Hurons were children who had died shortly after baptism. Adults who converted during the 1630s were baptized for a variety of reasons. Nonconformists, greedy individuals who did not want to participate in sharing rituals, and those who were attracted to Catholicism's liturgy were the first to become Christians.<sup>25</sup> During the 1640s, however, the number of converts rose dramatically. In 1646, over five hundred Hurons converted. The fear and confusion which accompanied the dispersal of the Hurons in 1649 prompted more than 3,000 Hurons to accept baptism. Between their 1626 arrival in Huronia, and their 1649 departure, the Jesuits converted approximately 12,000 Hurons.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Anderson, *Chain Her*, 46, 48.

<sup>25</sup> John Webster Grant, *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter since 1534* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 41-2.

<sup>26</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 19:77-9, 30:223, 35:23, 39:145.

Like other Christian orders of the seventeenth century, the Jesuits believed that women were inferior to men. Traditionally, the subordination of Christian women was based on several biblical references. For instance, because Adam was made in the image of God, he (like all men) was superior to Eve, who was created only in the image of man.<sup>27</sup> Further, Eve was created as a "helper" for Adam, and not as an equal. Finally, traditional Christian thought held Eve responsible for the Fall--humanity's loss of innocence and expulsion from the Garden of Eden. When encouraged by the serpent, Eve ate fruit from the tree of knowledge, and she tempted Adam to eat it as well. As a result, Christian belief presented Eve as the "representative of the alleged weaknesses of women."<sup>28</sup> The subjugation of Christian women to men was justified by Eve's original sin.

Granted, not all biblical women were depicted as evil temptresses. The antithesis of Eve was Mary, the virgin mother of Christ. Particularly in the Catholic faith, Mary, "has been revered not only as the Mother of God but also as a pure, ever-virgin woman, the perfect mother, [and] the intercessor between human beings and God . . ."<sup>29</sup> At once both virgin and mother, Mary is Christianity's ideal woman. No Christian woman has ever achieved the perfection of Mary.

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<sup>27</sup> Karen Lee Anderson, "As Gentle as Little Lambs: Images of Huron and Montagnais-Naskapi Women in the Writings of the 17th Century Jesuits," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (November 1988), 568.

<sup>28</sup> Katherin Doob Sakenfeld, "Eve," in Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 207.

<sup>29</sup> Valerie Abrahamsen, "Mary, Mother of Jesus," in Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 500.

Many Huron women were quick to understand the limitations Christianity placed on them.<sup>30</sup> Foremost among the concerns of Huron women was the strict moral code of the Christian faith. For example, pregnancy outside marriage was not stigmatized in pre-contact Huronia. However, once pregnant, women usually married. When a young woman became pregnant, each of her lovers claimed that he loved her more than any other man, and that the baby was his. The woman then chose which of her lovers she wished to marry.<sup>31</sup> When pregnancy was not a factor, mothers often arranged the marriages of their children. However, young Huron men and women were not compelled to marry the partner chosen for them by their parents.<sup>32</sup>

Actual Huron marriages were far removed from the Jesuit ideal of marriage. Seventeenth-century Christianity stipulated that sexual relations were to be initiated only after marriage, and were to be engaged in only by husband and wife. Sexual intercourse for pleasure was considered a sin; procreation was the only reason for marital sex.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, Christian marriage created a patrilocal family unit--husband, wife, and children, who lived together in one household. Finally, Christian marriages were indissoluble.

All the rules of Christian marriage were alien to Huron society. Pre-marital sexual relations were acceptable and prevalent.<sup>34</sup> Before and after

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<sup>30</sup> Carol Devens, *Countering Colonization: Native American Women and Great Lakes Missions, 1630-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 29.

<sup>31</sup> Samuel de Champlain, *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain, 1604-1618*, W. L. Grant, ed. (New York: Scribner, 1907), 320.

<sup>32</sup> Anderson, "Huron Women," 62.

<sup>33</sup> Anderson, *Chain Her*, 81-2.

<sup>34</sup> Champlain, *Voyages*, 320.

marriage, heterosexual intercourse was considered natural and normal. Celibacy was considered deviant behaviour in the Huron country.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, the idea that sexual intercourse was limited to husband and wife, for procreation only, was considered bizarre by the Hurons. As Delâge points out,

[s]exual freedom acted as a kind of social cement, bonding men and women of the same community. It was linked to the rules of hospitality, and also to relations between men and women of allied tribes.<sup>36</sup>

Sexual intercourse fulfilled other social functions, as well. For example, sexual relations were a crucial component of some curing ceremonies. Women, of course, were free to choose their sexual partners. Sagard describes a curing ceremony in which the girls of a Huron village assembled in the cabin of a sick woman. Each girl chose a young man of the village with whom to sleep. The young men were then informed of the girls' wishes, and subsequently arrived at the sick woman's cabin, where each man, ". . . [slept] with the girl who had chosen him, [and] from one end of the cabin to the other . . . they pass[ed] the whole night in this way. . ."<sup>37</sup>

Another difference between Huron and Christian marriages was the family unit produced by marriage. The traditional family in Huronia was the extended family, which practiced matrilocal residency. A newlywed Huron couple moved into the longhouse of the woman's parents or other maternal relatives. Huron longhouses usually sheltered a woman, her husband, her

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<sup>35</sup> Cornelius J. Jaenen, *Friend and Foe: Aspects of French-Amerindian Cultural Contact in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), 72.

<sup>36</sup> Delâge, *Bitter Feast*, 201, 204.

<sup>37</sup> Sagard, *Voyage*, 195.

married daughters (and sons-in-law), and her grandchildren. Women who resided together often shared the work necessary to meet the subsistence needs of the longhouse. Goods produced by a married man were given to two groups--his mother's longhouse and his wife's. As a result, women could depend on a number of sources to fill their subsistence requirements. A woman's mother, sisters, and daughters worked with her to produce food and other subsistence needs. Additionally, women could count on the produce of their fathers, brothers, husbands, sons, brothers-in-law, and sons-in-law. In stark contrast, Christian marriages produced patrilocal single nuclear families. These families consisted only of a man, his wife, and his children, who resided together in a single family structure. Christian women, then, did not have the access to wide and diverse sources of subsistence goods that traditional Huron women did. The nuclear family structure affected not only Christian women, but traditional women as well. Each man who converted to Christianity, and consequently established his own nuclear family, was a man traditional women could no longer rely upon for support. Clearly, the family unit created by Christianity did not offer women the benefits that traditional families did. Yet, the single nuclear family was an institution the Jesuits were determined to create in Huronia.<sup>38</sup> As historian Carol Devens argues, "[t]he settled life and nuclear family pattern advocated by the Jesuits to civilize the Indians encouraged the breakdown of the flexible, multifamily units . . . thus further weakening women's position in the community."<sup>39</sup>

Huron marriage also differed from Christian marriage over the issue of divorce. Divorce was common in Huronia. Both men and women could

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<sup>38</sup> Anderson, *Chain Her*, 79, 113-14, 141, 150.

<sup>39</sup> Devens, *Countering Colonization*, 29.

initiate divorce. Huron women, "easily [left] their husbands when the men [did] not completely agree with them." After a divorce, a Huron woman could depend on her extended family to support herself and her children. Sagard speculated that some Huron women married twelve or fifteen times before finding a husband that suited them.<sup>40</sup> Lafitau recorded several marital obstacles that could lead to divorce in Huronia:

Bad humour, lack of compliance, obstinate attachment to members of their families who they let govern them, storms of temper, jealousies, [and] infidelities on both sides, furnish them different reasons for breaks.<sup>41</sup>

Divorce was sought for other reasons as well. For example, women divorced men who were incapable of providing for their families.<sup>42</sup> As well, divorce was sometimes attributed to childlessness within a marriage. Once a couple had children together, however, they rarely divorced, unless circumstances were overwhelming.<sup>43</sup>

The ease with which divorce was initiated in Huronia was in direct contrast with Catholicism's view of marriage. The Jesuits considered marriage an inviolate institution. Catholicism prohibited divorce. The Jesuits realized that divorce was a traditional practice in Huronia, a practice which many Huron women considered indispensable. One Huron woman, deathly ill in the 1636-7 epidemic, refused baptism because, "[t]he Father Superior represented to her that, having been baptized, she must count upon never separating from her husband . . ."<sup>44</sup> The indissolubility of Christian

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<sup>40</sup> Sagard, *Voyage*, 200; Bruce G. Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers: Canada's "Heroic Age" Reconsidered* (Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985), 195.

<sup>41</sup> Lafitau, *Customs*, 1:350.

<sup>42</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 709.

<sup>43</sup> Sagard, *Voyage*, 201.

<sup>44</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 13:141.

marriage remained a serious obstacle to conversion, particularly the conversion of Huron women.

Because Huron women were aware of the restraints Christianity would place on them, they were reluctant to convert. However, women were strongly pressured to accept Christianity. Christian Hurons were granted a number of economic advantages that were not offered to non-Christians. For example, in 1639, the Jesuits explained that,

[t]he Gentlemen of the Company of New France, in order to induce the Savages to settle, have granted the same favo[u]r in their store to the sedentary Christians as to the French. They have also ordered that some cleared land be given to the young girls who marry; they have, moreover, set apart every year a sum of money to make presents to the Christian Hurons who come to supply themselves with goods at their stores.

Christianity clearly carried tangible economic rewards.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, the French did not trade firearms to non-Christians. The French, and especially the Jesuits, were concerned that non-Christians would use guns against the Europeans. Therefore, firearms were sold only to those Hurons who were firmly under the spiritual guidance of the Jesuits.<sup>46</sup> It is true that trade advantages and the sale of firearms were primarily inducements for Huron men to convert. However, Christian men married to non-Christian women were not considered full converts. In 1639, the Jesuits wrote,

[t]here are two or three of them [baptized Indigenous men] who have married Savage women who are not Christians, because they were unable to find any baptized women willing to marry them. We deal leniently with them, allowing them to come to prayers, but we do not yet admit them to the Sacraments.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 16:33.

<sup>46</sup> Delâge, *Bitter Feast*, 120.

<sup>47</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 16:59. The translation of the original text makes it difficult to

Therefore, baptized men likely placed great pressure on their wives to convert.

Epidemic disease and death placed a tremendous amount of pressure on Huron women to accept Christianity. One of the most common arguments the Jesuits used to urge baptism was the idea that Christians and non-Christians were separated in the afterlife. During the 1636-7 epidemic, the Jesuits warned a non-Christian woman that she would never see her deceased daughter in the afterlife. Le Jeune exhorted the woman to accept baptism by telling her that,

'Thy daughter . . . is very happy and thou wilt be forever unhappy; she is in Heaven, and thou wilt be at the bottom of the abyss. Thou sayest that thou lovest her; thou canst not follow her, if thou dost not believe and if thou art not baptized.'

In the early years of the Jesuit mission, when few Hurons were baptized, this argument did not always work. One Huron woman told her dying husband that, "it would not be proper for him [to accept baptism and] go to heaven, since none of his relatives were there . . ." After more Hurons converted, the thought of being separated from their loved ones for all eternity encouraged others to convert.<sup>48</sup>

While the thought of being separated from their relatives in the afterlife convinced some Hurons to convert, parents of deceased children often converted. As Brébeuf noted during the 1636-7 epidemic, ". . . parents yet surviving say that they do not wish to be separated from their children,

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determine who "them" refers to--the baptized men or their non-Christian wives. However, the original text reads, ". . . on agit doucement a[v]ec eux . . ." Surely if the Jesuits had been speaking of the wives, the text would read, ". . . on agit doucement a[v]ec elles. . ."

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:39, 13:127.



and that where these have gone, they too will go after death." However, babies and young children were often baptized secretly, and without parental consent. For example, alerted to the imminent death of a newborn,

Father Garnier baptized it without the knowledge of its parents, --having for this purpose, had the foresight to dip his handkerchief in water before entering the cabin. Perhaps if the mother had been consulted thereupon, she would not have been favo[u]rable to it . . ."

The Jesuits became quite adept at covert baptisms. In 1640, the Jesuit Joseph-Marie Chaumonot admitted that, "[w]e have baptized a great number of [ill children] without the knowledge of their parents, who would certainly have opposed it. Many of these children have already departed for heaven."<sup>49</sup> Regardless of how baptism was administered, the Jesuits taught that those who were baptized went to heaven. Faced with eternal separation from their children, many Hurons accepted baptism.

The most compelling reason Hurons converted was to escape contagious disease and death. Because Europeans remained in almost perfect health during epidemic outbreaks, many Hurons believed that the Christian God was more powerful than Huron spirits. As the Jesuits pointed out, ". . . our Hurons have thought that, if they believed in God and served him as we do, they would not die in so large numbers."<sup>50</sup> During the 1636-7 epidemic outbreak, the Hurons invited the Jesuits to a council. When asked what would cause God to have compassion on the Hurons, the Jesuits advised,

that the principal thing was to believe in [God], and to be firmly

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 11:9, 14:7-9, 18:39.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:149.

resolved to keep his commandments, . . . especially . . . that their marriages be binding and for life, and that they should observe conjugal chastity . . .

The Jesuits often promoted Christianity as a cure for epidemic disease. For example, during the 1634 measles outbreak, Le Jeune advised an ill Montagnais man that the priest "could not cure him, but that [his] God could do all . . ." <sup>51</sup>

In addition to dispensing advice, the Jesuits also provided food, medicine, and compassion for ill Hurons. During the 1634 measles outbreak and the 1636-7 epidemic, the Jesuits doled out raisins and prunes to the sick. Additionally, the Jesuits' servants provided fresh hunted meat for those dying from illness or the accompanying famine. The Jesuits hoped that their charitable acts would persuade the Hurons to accept Christianity. Many Hurons, however, accepted the charity, but not the ideology. The Jesuits related the refusal of a dying Huron woman, named Khiongnona, to accept Christianity, although the Jesuits,

daily carried her soup and a little piece of meat. At first, she allowed herself to be instructed, to some extent, and had partially consented to [b]aptism. But later, during the five or six days before her death, [they] could not get any satisfaction from her, as she sometimes refused to listen, and again herself said that she did not hear; yet, if you spoke of giving her something, she heard you very well."

Khiongnona died without receiving baptism. Other Hurons, impressed by the charity of the Jesuits, converted. In addition to their charitable work, the Jesuits also spent hours visiting ill Hurons, and encouraging them to accept baptism. The actions of the Jesuits were in stark contrast with Huron shamans. Traditionally, shamans only visited the ill at the request of family

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:149, 13:169-71, 7:133.

members. As well, shamans expected payment for their services.<sup>52</sup> Yet, Huron shamans were incapable of halting epidemic disease and death. As a result, some Hurons turned to the only available alternative--the Jesuits.

It was not only the health, advice, and charity of the Jesuits which initiated baptisms among the Hurons. More important, the rite of baptism appeared to confer health on several deathly ill people. Seeing their family and friends "cured" by baptism, other Hurons converted as well. In 1642, Jerome Lalemant recorded that,

out of many children who were dangerously ill and who were [b]aptized, all recovered their health. Therefore it was that the parents, who witnessed this blessing of Heaven conferred on these little Christians, procured this happiness for them as soon as possible, when they saw them in danger.<sup>53</sup>

The rite of baptism seemed to improve directly the health of several converts. Additionally, for some Hurons, conversion represented the only chance to seek medical assistance. Occasionally, Christian Hurons did not allow their ill relatives to use traditional remedies. In 1642, a young girl became deathly ill. Her uncle refused to call the shamans, saying, "let her die, rather than that I should have recourse to the assistance of a sworn enemy of God."<sup>54</sup> Faced with the choice of no medical assistance or conversion, some Hurons sought baptism. To many Hurons, Christianity represented survival. And survival was a powerful reason to accept baptism.

Despite the pressure to convert, the majority of Huron women resisted Christianity. Most Huron women preferred to practice traditional beliefs.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 11:9, 8:147-9, 13:113-15, 133, 33:203.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 23:209.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 23:87.

<sup>55</sup> Devens, *Countering Colonization*, 22.

Those women who chose to adhere to traditional beliefs maintained much of their power and prestige. Additionally, the power of Huron women was great enough to compel their children and husbands to also uphold tradition. For example, Huron women refused to send their sons to the Jesuit seminary. As well, unless the Jesuits performed a secret baptism, the conversion of children was usually left to the discretion of their mothers. Further, men who persisted in following the Christian faith were sometimes divorced, evicted from their homes, or ostracized by their clans.<sup>56</sup>

It is undeniable that some Huron women accepted Christianity. The pressures of economic incentives, afterlife considerations, and epidemic disease and death convinced some women to accept baptism. While thousands of Hurons were baptized, it is difficult to estimate how many Huron converts practiced the Christian faith devoutly and exclusively. Van der Donck noted that,

[t]he Jesuits have taken great pains and trouble in Canada to convert the Indians to the Roman Church, and outwardly many profess that religion; but inasmuch as they are not well instructed in its fundamental principles, they fall off lightly and make sport of the subject and its doctrine.<sup>57</sup>

For many Hurons, Christianity represented tangible material benefits rather than an ideology. As a result, the Hurons, "accepted some things the mission had to offer, while often rejecting or modifying the ideological message of Christianity."<sup>58</sup> The Jesuits were well aware that not all their converts faithfully practiced Christianity. Hurons who accepted baptism as an

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<sup>56</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 9:283-5, 11:83, 13:123-5, 23:127.

<sup>57</sup> Adriaen Van der Donck, *A Description of the New Netherlands*, Thomas F. O'Donnell, ed. (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1968), 103.

<sup>58</sup> James P. Ronda, "The Sillery Experiment: A Jesuit-Indian Village in New France, 1637-1663," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 3, no.1 (1979), 2.

antidote to epidemic disease sometimes, "abandoned both the Faith and the name of Christian almost as soon as they recovered their health . . ." <sup>59</sup> Those Hurons who accepted baptism while ill probably considered it a healing ritual, much like traditional curing ceremonies. Trigger argues that "becoming a Christian was viewed as analogous to a sick person joining one of these [medicine] societies." <sup>60</sup> Most Hurons did not understand the exclusiveness of Christianity. Traditional Huron religion did not "limit access to spiritual power to a single cult, and borrowing from the religious repertoire of other tribes was a common practice." <sup>61</sup> Therefore, many Hurons who converted to Christianity assumed that they would be able to continue their traditional rituals and beliefs.

Some scholars argue that Christianity provoked the loss of power and prestige among Huron women. Anderson, for example, states that Christianity, ". . . denigrated women's power at every step, setting husbands, the church and a male God in a watchful hierarchy over them." <sup>62</sup> However, not all Christian Hurons strictly adhered to the principles of Christianity. The Hurons often selected or rejected certain aspects of Christianity, which allowed a consolidation of traditional and Christian beliefs. For example, the Jesuits told an ill Huron man that he had sinned by having a game of dish played in order to recover his health. However, the man had adapted his traditional beliefs to fit into the confines created by Christianity. In response to the Jesuits' rebuke, the man argued, "that what he had done was not done because he believed that it would restore his health, but merely to divert

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<sup>59</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 28:41.

<sup>60</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 389, 505.

<sup>61</sup> Grant, *Moon*, 39.

<sup>62</sup> Anderson, "Little Lambs," 574.

himself." Additionally, an Algonquian man justified his traditional remedy of bark tea by stating that God made the bark and, therefore, the remedy as well. Finally, Christian Hurons pacified the Jesuits by minutely altering their traditional practice of gathering together to sing to the sick. In 1654, the Jesuit Le Mercier praised the "new" customs of the Hurons:

In former times there was a form of superstition which gave us much trouble to combat,--singing in the presence of the sick in order to assuage their sufferings, with invocations to the demons of the illness. Now, that custom has been turned into true devotion, the girl singers being called to the cabins of the sick, in order to sing the praises of God.<sup>63</sup>

Because the Hurons did not always accept the Christian message in its entirety, it is difficult to estimate how much power and prestige Huron women lost to Christianity. However, epidemic disease, and not Christianity, instigated the loss of power and prestige that Huron women suffered.

Epidemic disease had a tremendous, and negative, cultural impact on Huron women. Rampant illness and death left Huron women unable to fulfill their roles as mothers, wives, and elders. The dissolution of kinship ties due to epidemic disease negatively affected both the physical well-being and the social status of Huron women. Widespread illness and death did not allow Huron women to participate in traditional rituals, such as curing ceremonies or funerals. The inability of traditional beliefs to cope with the devastating epidemics allowed new beliefs, such as Christianity, to become entrenched in Huronia. Epidemic disease directly influenced many Hurons to accept baptism. Some Hurons hoped the Christian faith would keep their loved

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<sup>63</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 14:81-3, 41:193, 141.

ones together in the afterlife. Others converted because of the compassion shown to the sick by the Jesuits or because baptism appeared to confer health. Once they converted, the Hurons were expected to conform to Christian ideology, including the subjugation of Huron women to men. However, had Huron society not been subjected to the societal disruptions that accompanied the epidemics, the Hurons would not have accepted Christianity as easily or as soon.

**Chapter Six**  
**The Long-Term Effects of Epidemic Disease**  
**on Huron Women:**  
**Beyond 1649**

Early in the morning of 16 March 1649, the Five Nations attacked the Huron village of Taenhatentaron. Of the four hundred people who resided in the village, almost all were killed or taken captive. However, at least three men escaped, and fled to St. Louis, a nearby Huron village. These survivors of Taenhatentaron warned the Hurons at St. Louis of the Five Nations' attack. In a panic, most of the residents of St. Louis fled to the Jesuits' mission headquarters at Sainte-Marie. However, about eighty Huron men, and two Jesuits, stayed behind to defend St. Louis. Once the Five Nations warriors arrived at St. Louis, however, they,

entered victoriously, . . . [and] reduced everything to desolation,--  
into the midst of the flames the old men, the sick, the children who had  
not been able to escape, and all those who, being too severely  
wounded, could not have followed them into captivity.

Confident of their success, the Five Nations determined to press their advantage and attack Sainte-Marie on the morning of March 17. The Hurons, however, were prepared for the assault. After the two groups met near St. Louis on March 17, the Hurons forced the advance party of the Five Nations into the village's palisade. The Hurons took control of St. Louis and captured about thirty Five Nations warriors. When the main force of the Five Nations party arrived, the Hurons managed to hold St. Louis. Almost one



hundred Five Nations warriors were killed on 17 March 1649. Disappointed by their losses, the Five Nations warriors departed for Iroquoia.<sup>1</sup>

The 1630s and 1640s had introduced tremendous stresses into Huron society. Contagious disease was the cause of many hardships in post-contact Huronia. Physical and emotional devastation, cultural collapse, warfare with the Five Nations, and deep divisions between Christian and non-Christian Hurons emerged in the aftermath of epidemic disease. Prior to March 1649, the combination of internal pressures had seriously weakened the Huron Confederacy. As a result, the Huron people were not able to cope with the attacks of March 16 and 17. Ultimately, the Confederacy collapsed. The Jesuits noted that, "[i]n consequence of the losses incurred, a part of the country of the Hurons is seen to be in desolation; fifteen villages have been abandoned, the people of each scattering where they could . . ." Some Hurons sought refuge among the Petuns or the Neutrals. Others joined the Ottawas on Manitoulin Island. Many Hurons turned to the Jesuits for help and protection. In response, the Jesuits urged the Hurons to move with them to Gahoendoe, which was also called Christian Island by the missionaries. The Jesuits traveled to Gahoendoe in mid-May 1649, and found about three hundred Huron families already settled there. Within a few months, several thousand Hurons relocated to Gahoendoe.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce G. Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660*, reprint (Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), 762-6; Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed. *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France* 73 volumes (New York: Pageant, 1959), 34:127.

<sup>2</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 34:197, 203-5; Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 767-72. Trigger writes that the Jesuits' estimate of six to eight thousand Hurons living on Gahoendoe during 1649-50 "must be an exaggeration." Nevertheless, Trigger does admit that at least a few thousand Hurons lived on the island over the winter of 1649-50.

Life on Gahoendoe during 1649-50 was filled with despair and deprivation. The resources on the island were scarce and the Hurons were not able to clear land early enough in the spring to plant corn, beans, or other agricultural staples. Famine was rampant; yet, extensive work had to be completed before the arrival of winter. The Jesuit Chaumonot wrote that in spite of their hunger, the Hurons had to:

clear new forest, make cabins, and erect palisades, in order to secure themselves in the coming year from famine and war; indeed, seeing them, you might conclude that these are poor corpses unearthed.

In addition to famine, the Hurons suffered from contagious disease during the winter of 1649-50. Famine and epidemic disease became a vicious circle for those Hurons living on Gahoendoe. Malnutrition lowers the ability of human beings to resist contagious disease. Additionally, those suffering from illness often have difficulty procuring food. As a result, in times of famine, people often contract contagious disease, which makes it even more difficult to appease hunger. According to the Jesuits, "[t]hose who were totally without means to guard against the famine were attacked by a contagious malady, which carried off a great number of them, especially of the children . . ."<sup>3</sup>

The Jesuits provided some food for the starving Hurons at Gahoendoe. However, the priests gave the best portions of their food to the most zealous Christian converts. To control the allotment of food, the Jesuits distributed a type of coin. The Hurons gave the coins back to the Jesuits to receive their share of food. Some Hurons were able to trade their coins only for acorns; others received a small amount of smoked fish. However, those Hurons who were, "[t]he more favo[u]red among them received a little Indian meal,

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<sup>3</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 34:215, 35:21, 91.

boiled in water."<sup>4</sup> To obtain the best portions of food, then, the Hurons had to demonstrate Christian principles. Trigger argues that it was hunger which "encouraged starving Huron[s] to make a display of Christian piety in the hope of receiving preferential treatment."<sup>5</sup> Even the most zealous Christian Hurons, however, suffered from hunger. In desperation, some Hurons cannibalized their deceased relatives. In the end, "hundreds and hundreds" of Hurons died on Gahoendoe during the winter of 1649-50.<sup>6</sup>

In the spring of 1650, most Hurons decided to abandon Gahoendoe. Some Hurons joined the Algonquians. However, others continued to rely on the Jesuits. In July 1650, three hundred Hurons accompanied the Jesuits to Quebec. Several hundred more Huron refugees joined those at Quebec later in the year. Those Hurons who followed the Jesuits to Quebec were settled at the Île d'Orleans, and subsequently resettled several times until establishing themselves at Jeune Lorette in 1697. Many of those Hurons who did not join the Algonquians or accompany the Jesuits to Quebec, decided to go to "the country of the [Five Nations], where they [found] many of their captive kinsmen, who exhort[ed] them to flight unless they [would] perish."<sup>7</sup>

Between 1640 and 1650, hundreds of Hurons were taken captive by the Five Nations. After 1650, many Hurons joined the Five Nations voluntarily. Approximately half of the surviving Huron population lived in Iroquoia following the dispersal of the Huron Confederacy. Regardless of

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 35:99.

<sup>5</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 780.

<sup>6</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 40:49.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 40:53, 57, 59; 41:137; Léon Gérin, "The Hurons of Lorette," *Transactions of the Ottawa Literary and Scientific Society*, 26 June 1900, 78.

why the Hurons joined the Five Nations, they were treated as captives. In the pre-contact era, Iroquoian nations occasionally adopted small numbers of prisoners, usually to replace deceased relatives. Adopted captives were usually treated well by the Five Nations. Captive men could aspire to political offices traditionally held by members of their adoptive families. A woman who was adopted by a Five Nations family could become the matron of her new longhouse. The massive adoption of captives that took place in post-epidemic Iroquoia, however, posed several problems for the Five Nations. Trigger argues that the integration of prisoners was hampered when several Hurons from the same village were taken to the same Iroquois community. Their proximity to each other allowed the prisoners to "retain their language, customs, and a common sense of identity." The large number of captives not only inhibited integration, but also increased the possibility of insurrections and escapes.<sup>8</sup>

To facilitate the mass adoption of captives into post-1650 Iroquoia, the Five Nations modified their adoption techniques. Individual prisoners were no longer always treated well. Captives who once would have been adopted were killed for little or no reason. Children were killed if they impeded their mothers' work. According to the Jesuits, after 1650, the Five Nations treated their captives as slaves. Prisoners in Iroquoia were granted only food and shelter in return for their "ceaseless labo[u]r and sweat." Although Huron captives were not literally slaves, they were treated harshly, especially after 1649. After the dispersal of the Huron Confederacy, integration of captives

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<sup>8</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 826-7.

into Five Nations society was accomplished by brutality rather than by traditional forms of encouragement.<sup>9</sup>

Once the Five Nations modified their methods of captive integration, almost all captives suffered. Physical distress was widespread. Emotional suffering, caused by the death of or separation from loved ones, was common. In addition to the general hardships, captive Huron women continued to witness the erosion of their traditional power and prestige. Large extended Huron families which joined the Five Nations after 1649 were not adopted by Iroquois families, but were allowed to reside in their own longhouses. However, heads of Huron longhouses were not allowed to participate in public councils.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the political power of transplanted Huron women was eliminated. Huron women who joined the Five Nations could not choose their political representatives. Further, women could not indirectly shape political policy by pressuring leaders with removal, as they had in Huronia. Granted, the exclusion of all Huron women from political power was only temporary. Once the Hurons and Five Nations were thoroughly integrated by intermarriage, some Huron women may have gained political power equal in amount to that of Five Nations women.

Not all captive Hurons were expected to relinquish all their traditional customs and practices. Among the Senecas, for example, an entire village was composed of Hurons who were allowed to retain their language and customs. However, these segregated Hurons had little political power.<sup>11</sup> Women who lived in segregated Huron communities may have retained political power at the household and community level. However, separate

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 830; Thwaites, *Relations*, 43:293.

<sup>10</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 828-30.

<sup>11</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 44:21.

Huron communities among the Five Nations were not granted seats on the confederacy council.<sup>12</sup> The political power of segregated Huron women in Iroquoia was limited.

The power and prestige of captive Huron women was also diminished because many captive Hurons persisted in practicing Catholicism while living among the Five Nations. As discussed in Chapter Five, Christianity traditionally considered women inferior to men and subject to men's rule. Huron women who accepted baptism lost much of their traditional political, economic, and social power. As a result, few women living in the Huron country converted to Christianity. However, Hurons taken captive by the Five Nations, and particularly Huron women, often practiced Christianity zealously.

When the Jesuit Simon le Moyne traveled to the country of the Onondagas in the summer of 1654, he visited a small fishing village which was inhabited by "almost none but Huron women, Christians for the most part,--formerly rich and enjoying their ease; but now reduced to servitude by their captivity." After 1650, Le Moyne was only one of several Jesuits who found groups of Huron women following the Christian faith in Iroquoia. In 1664, for example, Jérôme Lalemant wrote that among the Mohawks, ". . . some Huron Matrons[,] who constitute flying and hidden Churches, . . . assemble either in the thickness of the Forests or in some out-of-the-way Cabins, in order to recite there what prayers they know."<sup>13</sup> Delâge suggests that Christianity's message of persecution and suffering appealed to those

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<sup>12</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 828.

<sup>13</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 41:97; Thwaites, *Relations*, 49:107, cited in Denys Delâge, *Bitter Feast: Amerindians and Europeans in Northeastern North America, 1600-64*, Jane Brierley, trans. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993), 235.

Hurons in captivity, and offered an explanation to the Hurons for the hardships they had endured since contact with Europeans. Additionally, Catholicism offered hope to the captive Hurons through the idea that God punishes sin, but rewards good works. Del  ge also argues that Christianity could have "become a focus of social identity for the underdog, especially for women."<sup>14</sup> Captive Huron women held few of the powers they had been accustomed to in Huronia. Therefore, Christianity no longer posed a threat to the power and prestige of Huron women. Instead, the Christian faith offered solace and hope. Or, as Richter suggests, captive Hurons may have used Christianity as a way to maintain a different identity from their captors and to avoid integration.<sup>15</sup> Whatever their reasons for practicing Catholicism, however, the Catholic belief that women were subordinate to men largely negated any chance Catholic Huron women may have had of regaining their traditional powers.

While some Huron women living among the Five Nations retained their traditional power and prestige, the power of most Iroquoian women eroded over time. For example, the matrilineal longhouse began to change by the turn of the eighteenth century. Longhouses grew smaller, both in size and in the number of families who resided in each longhouse.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Christianity introduced the concept of single nuclear families residing in patrilineal households. As the number of Christian converts grew, the number of longhouses decreased. By the mid-nineteenth century, more than three-

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<sup>14</sup> Del  ge, *Bitter Feast*, 235.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel K. Richter, "Iroquois Versus Iroquois: Jesuit Missions and Christianity in Village Politics, 1642-1686," *Ethnohistory* 32, no.1 (1985): 9.

<sup>16</sup> Elisabeth Tooker, "The Five (Later Six) Nations Confederacy, 1550-1784," 79-91, in Edward S. Rogers and Donald B. Smith, eds., *Aboriginal Ontario: Historical Perspectives on the First Nations* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1994), 87.

quarters of the Six Nations people who resided at the Grand River Reserve in southern Ontario were Christian.<sup>17</sup> The longhouse was crucial to the maintenance of women's traditional power and prestige. The matrilineal practices of the seventeenth-century Iroquoians allowed women to exert control over residence patterns, the behaviour of family members, and appointment of council members. Decreasing longhouse size, as well as decreasing numbers of longhouses, limited the amount of power and prestige that Iroquoian women held.

Over time, Iroquoian women also lost their traditional control of agricultural production. In the seventeenth century, Iroquoian women maintained their traditional power and prestige through their control of the food supply. The production of corn, in particular, gave women indirect control over trade, warfare, and village relocation. By the late nineteenth century, however, agricultural production was the responsibility of Iroquoian men.<sup>18</sup> Women lost one of their main sources of power. The one aspect of women's power which continued into the twentieth century was clan membership based on matrilineal ties.<sup>19</sup>

It is difficult to estimate how many Hurons were absorbed into Five Nations society after 1649. Based on the Jesuits' records, Trigger argues that "... several thousand [Hurons] must eventually have been incorporated into Iroquois society . . ." If Trigger is correct, the majority of Hurons who

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<sup>17</sup> Sally M. Weaver, "The Iroquois: The Grand River Reserve in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries, 1875-1945," 213-57, in Edward S. Rogers and Donald B. Smith, eds., *Aboriginal Ontario: Historical Perspectives on the First Nations* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1994), 219. Weaver reports that the number of Christians residing at the reserve was 2 089; the number of traditionalists was 657.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>19</sup> Gérin, "Lorette," 87-8.



survived the hardships of the 1630s and 1640s joined the Five Nations.<sup>20</sup> However, several hundred Hurons chose to join other Indigenous nations, such as the Petuns or the Algonquins. Many hundred other Hurons chose to live among the French, and remained under the guidance of the Jesuits. Depending on where they went after the dispersal, the power, prestige, and destiny of Huron women differed greatly.

After the dispersal of the Huron Confederacy in 1649, some Hurons joined the Petun, or Tionnontaté, nation. The Petuns were the closest neighbors of the Hurons. A trail, approximately thirty miles long, linked Ossossané, the most populous and important town of the Attignawantan, to the Petun villages located southwest of Huronia. During the 1640s, the Petun nation had also been devastated by epidemic disease and warfare with the Five Nations. In December 1649, while the main body of Petun warriors was absent, the Five Nations attacked the Petun village of Etharita, which was located centrally in the Petun country. Most of the residents of Etharita were killed or captured by Five Nations warriors. Ultimately, the December 1649 attack on Etharita had much the same consequences for the Petuns as the March 1649 attacks had had for the Hurons. The Petun nation dispersed. In the summer of 1650, however, some Hurons and Petuns joined forces, and settled on Michilimackinac Island. This small group of Hurons and Petuns resettled frequently in the Great Lakes region during the seventeenth century.<sup>21</sup> In the early eighteenth century, however, the Huron-Petun alliance settled in present-day Ohio and became known as the Wyandot nation.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 826.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 91, 741, 300, 777, 820.

<sup>22</sup> Elisabeth Tooker, "Wyandot," in Bruce G. Trigger, ed., *Handbook of North American*

Traditionally, Petun culture was quite similar to Huron culture. As Trigger points out, the Jesuits noticed no linguistic or marked cultural differences between the Petuns and the Attignawantans, one of the first member nations of the Huron Confederacy.<sup>23</sup> Further, ethnologist Elisabeth Tooker argues that ". . . Wyandot sociopolitical organization remained basically Iroquoian in character . . . as did other aspects of their culture." Longhouses, an important indication of women's power, continued to serve as residences for the Wyandots during the eighteenth century. It is likely that Huron women who joined the Petuns maintained much of their traditional power and prestige. However, few Huron women actually joined the Petuns. The new Wyandot nation was composed mainly of Petuns. Additionally, the new nation was not large. In the eighteenth century, the number of Wyandot warriors was estimated at 150 to 250.<sup>24</sup> While Wyandot culture retained many of the traditional powers held by Huron women, only a few Huron women were members of the new nation.

After the winter of 1649-50, many Hurons fled to their Algonquian neighbors, such as the Algonquins and the Ottawas. Those Huron women who joined Algonquian tribes lost most of their historic power and prestige. Traditionally, the Algonquian groups of the St. Lawrence region were patrilocal and patrilineal.<sup>25</sup> In Huronia, much of women's power was

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*Indians: Northeast*, Volume 15 (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), 398-9.

<sup>23</sup> Trigger, *Aataentsic*, 94.

<sup>24</sup> Tooker, "Wyandot," 399.

<sup>25</sup> J. R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 1989), 9. In comparison, many of the Algonquian peoples of the mid-Atlantic seaboard region were matrilinear and matrilocal. See, for example, Robert Steven Grumet, "Sunksquaws, Shamans, and Tradeswomen: Middle Atlantic Coastal Algonkian Women During the 17th and 18th Centuries," in Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock, eds., *Women and Colonization: Anthropological*

dependent on their control of housing patterns and the selection of political leaders. Additionally, Huron women maintained their egalitarian status through economic influence. Among the St. Lawrence Algonquians, however, women's labour was not highly valued. The hunt, which was dominated by men, was the main source of food and trade goods for the Algonquians.<sup>26</sup> As a result, Algonquian women had very little power and prestige. Women lacked not only political and economic influence among Algonquian nations, but also social power. Unlike the Hurons, the Algonquians rarely initiated divorce. Further, the Jesuits noted that Algonquian men "beat [their wives] unmercifully, and often for a very slight cause."<sup>27</sup> According to Champlain, Algonquian men considered women, "a useless class."<sup>28</sup> Once Huron women were integrated into Algonquian society, they accepted the traditions of the Algonquians as their own and, as a result, lost their traditional power and prestige.

In addition to the traditional subordination of women to men, many of the Algonquian nations that the Hurons fled to practiced Christianity. For example, some Hurons found refuge with the Algonquins at Quebec or the Montagnais-Naskapi at Sillery. Christian Algonquians who lived at French settlements strictly adhered to Christianity. As result, Christian Algonquians established rigid rules regarding morality; those who broke the moral code were severely punished. At Sillery, for example, a Montagnais woman who left her husband was taken to Quebec to be imprisoned. Another

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*Perspectives* (New York: Praeger, 1980), 43-62.

<sup>26</sup> Conrad Heidenreich, *Huron: A History and Geography of the Huron Indians, 1600-1650* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), 295.

<sup>27</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 3:103.

<sup>28</sup> Samuel de Champlain, *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain, 1604-1618*, W. L. Grant, ed. (New York: Scribner, 1907), 246.

Montagnais woman at Sillery was publicly flogged when her Christian family believed she had visited a suitor without their permission. Visitors, as well as permanent residents, were forced to follow the Christian moral code at Sillery. In 1651, an Algonquin woman who visited Sillery caused some gossip. Consequently, she was told, "'Go away from here . . . The fort of Sillery is not for dogs, but for those who manifest their faith by the purity of their lives.' She had to obey at once."<sup>29</sup> It is clear that all residents of Sillery, permanent or temporary, regardless of their tribal affiliation, were forced to obey the Christian moral code. It is also clear that Christianity, and its accompanying morality, stripped traditional power and prestige from Indigenous women.

Huron women who did not join other Indigenous nations, but stayed under the guidance of the French and the Jesuits, also lost much of their traditional power and prestige. In the spring and summer of 1650, hundreds of Hurons left Gahoendoe and traveled to Quebec. The Jesuits did not settle the Hurons at Quebec, but at Île d'Orleans, approximately "two leagues" from the French settlement. The Hurons who settled at Île d'Orleans after 1649 were heavily dependent on the charity of the Jesuits and the French for survival. For the first two years after the exodus from Gahoendoe, the Jesuits,

. . . had to feed [the Hurons at Île d'Orleans], both adults and children . . . and build them a church, and a fort to protect them against the invasions of the Iroquois, the fear of whom followed them every where. It was necessary to furnish them with kettles and hatchets, and even to provide clothing for the greater number of the families . . .

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<sup>29</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 44:97-101; 42:263; 22:81-3, 115-21; 36:193-5.

The Jesuits did not record whether the greatest amount of their charity was given to the most zealous Christian converts at Île d'Orleans. However, based on the distribution of Jesuit charity in Huronia and on Gahoendoe, it is likely that the Jesuits continued to give the best portions of charity to the most devout Christians. In any case, the Jesuits made clear that the settlement at the Île d'Orleans was for "Christian families."<sup>30</sup>

Christianity negated the traditional power and prestige of Huron women. Yet, dependent on Jesuit charity for survival, Huron women had no choice but to adhere to the tenets of Christianity. As a result, those women who settled at Île d'Orleans lost the political, economic, and social power that had maintained their egalitarian position in Huronia. At first, Huron women at Île d'Orleans became subjugated to the Christian Church, and later, to men. Options traditionally available to Huron women were not available to Christian Huron women. For example, one Huron woman, recently widowed, vowed not to marry again. The woman told the Jesuit Le Mercier that, "[i]f I had been *permitted* to do as I wished, I would, long ago, have lived with my husband as a sister."<sup>31</sup> At Île d'Orleans, Huron women no longer controlled their sexual activity, and they could not divorce an unsuitable sexual partner.

Life at Île d'Orleans placed other restraints against the traditional power of Huron women. For example, a Huron mother, ". . . saw her only son outrageously beaten and seriously hurt by a woman blinded with passion. . . . [T]he blood with which the child was covered moved her to take revenge in a similar manner . . . ." However, a Jesuit intervened and cautioned the

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 41:137-9.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 40:229. My emphasis.

mother against her traditional right. As a result, neither the mother nor the child's aunt exacted the vengeance that was traditionally their due. More seriously, a Huron woman at Île d'Orleans "begged" her son,

to ask [the Jesuits] on her behalf for about an arpent of land in which she might sow corn for the support of her family . . . The young man, although exhausted by sickness, almost became angry with his [m]other. "Am I in a condition," he said to her, "to think of your fields?" . . . Then, addressing the Father, he said, "If she be not a better Christian than she has hitherto been, it is not right that she should have preference over those who are more deserving than she is; do whatever may be good for her."<sup>32</sup>

In Huronia, women had been largely responsible for cultivation of the land, and for meeting subsistence needs. While Huron men had contributed to agricultural production by clearing fields, Huron women did not ask men for permission to sow or harvest. Yet, at Île d'Orleans, a Huron woman had to ask both her son and the Jesuits for the opportunity to feed her family. Clearly, Huron women's traditional power decreased dramatically under the guidance of the Jesuits at Île d'Orleans.

Several scholars argue that Hurons, like other Indigenous people, did not accept the Christian doctrine in its entirety. Instead, many Indigenous people,

accepted the missionaries' offerings in just the amounts necessary to maintain their own cultural identity. . . . [I]n general, they . . . accepted only as much as would ensure survival. Because of their creative adaptability and the defects of the mission programs, many Indian people were never fully "washed in the blood of the lamb."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 41:153-5; 43:245-7.

<sup>33</sup> James Axtell, *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 86.

The evidence clearly shows that prior to 1649, many Hurons also selectively adapted Christianity to their own traditional culture.<sup>34</sup> Once at Île d'Orleans, however, the Hurons adhered more closely to the Christian faith. Consequently, the power and prestige of Huron women were abolished.

The fate of those Hurons who followed the Jesuits to Île d'Orleans clearly illustrates the affect of Christianity on women's traditional power. Most of the Hurons who initially settled at Île d'Orleans in 1650 resettled at Sainte Foy in 1667, at Ancienne Lorette in 1674, and finally, at Jeune Lorette in 1697. At the turn of the twentieth century, descendants of the Hurons at Île d'Orleans still resided at Jeune Lorette. The culture of the Hurons at Jeune Lorette bore little resemblance to the Huron culture of the seventeenth century. There were no longhouses at Jeune Lorette. Instead the Hurons resided in "small, low-roofed wooden buildings, whitewashed, [which were] in double rows separated by narrow lanes. . . . Some houses [had] a very small kitchen garden attached . . ." Agriculture was not important to the economy of Jeune Lorette, indubitably because the land was unsuitable for cultivation. The few agricultural products grown at Lorette included potatoes, hay, and oats. The Hurons supplemented the products of the hunt and the fields by gathering and selling firewood, and by engaging in day labour. The Huron language was no longer spoken at Lorette. Additionally, the matrilineal and matrilocal practices of the Hurons ceased to exist long before the twentieth century. One of the Hurons at Lorette, a man born around the year 1820, "argued with great warmth that man, and not woman, the husband, not the wife, made the race. He was seemingly unaware that

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<sup>34</sup> See Chapter Five.

this was the very opposite of the Huron doctrine . . ."<sup>35</sup> The strength of the Huron culture declined as a result of the intermarriages of Huron men and French-Canadian women.

At Jeune Lorette, several generations of Huron men had married French-Canadian women. As Léon Gérin argues,

[t]he French-Canadian wife and mother was a potent factor of transformation at Lorette, and, of course, it was in her particular sphere, at the home, in family life, on domestic usages and manners, that her influence was felt most strongly.<sup>36</sup>

The historical record offers no explanation for the preponderance of marriages between Huron men and French-Canadian women at Jeune Lorette. However, based on earlier records, it is possible that many Huron men chose to marry French-Canadian women who were more devout Christians than Huron women. As early as 1638, a Huron man claimed, "I will never take a Huron woman [as a wife], if I do not see in her extraordinary constancy; I will try to find a French woman. If I am refused, I am resolved to live and die in chastity."<sup>37</sup> Regardless of why Huron men at Lorette married French-Canadian women, however, the marriages resulted in the loss of traditional Huron culture. And it was traditional culture which established and supported the power and prestige of Huron women.

The most immediate and severe result of the Five Nations' attacks of March 16 and 17 in 1649 was the dispersal of the Huron Confederacy. A nation that had once been powerful and populous simply ceased to exist. Regardless of where the Hurons went after the dispersal, they faced hardship

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<sup>35</sup> Gérin, "Lorette," 73, 75-6, 78, 80, 87, 89.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>37</sup> Thwaites, *Relations*, 14:235.



and change. One of the hardships many Huron women faced was the continued erosion of their traditional power and prestige. Some Huron women, such as those who joined the Petuns or the Neutrals, were able to retain most of their traditional powers. Many Huron women, specifically those who joined the Five Nations, lost their traditional rights for a time (possibly generations) before regaining them through intermarriage. Others, especially the Huron women who joined the Algonquians or followed the Jesuits to Île d'Orleans, lost virtually all their traditional power and prestige. The long-term effect of contagious disease on Huron women was disastrous. It is true that hundreds of Huron women survived the epidemics, the dispersal, and the winter on Gahoendoe. It is also true that after 1649, hundreds of Huron women joined nations which upheld their traditional power. However, thousands of Huron women lost their lives to epidemic disease. Many hundreds more lost some, or all, of their traditional rights. Even those who were able to retain their power and prestige among other nations were subjected to physical and emotional hardship, the loss of loved ones, intense brutality, and the loss of their homeland. The long-term effect of contagious disease on Huron women was negative and devastating.

## Conclusion

Aataentsic, the mother of the Huron people, held extraordinary power and prestige. The world was created for Aataentsic as she fell from the sky. In a world where no men resided, both Aataentsic and her daughter gave birth. Once Aataentsic's surviving grandson reached adulthood, grandmother and grandson controlled the world. Of the many powers Aataentsic held, she was responsible for all life and all death. The female turtle of the Huron creation story also had tremendous power and prestige. When she saw Aataentsic fall from the sky, the turtle called a general assembly of all the aquatic animals. The animals decided that they would follow any decision the turtle made. It was under the guidance of the female turtle that the world was created.

In pre-contact times, the creation myth acted as an index, and possibly a source, of women's power in Huronia. While Huron women did not hold the extensive powers of Aataentsic and the turtle, they held a relatively egalitarian position in Huron society. Much of the power and prestige of Huron women stemmed from their control of corn production. Corn was the single most important food staple in Huronia. Approximately 65 per cent of a Huron's daily caloric intake consisted of corn. Huron women also provided another twenty per cent of the daily caloric consumption through other agricultural products. Clearly, women were crucial to the subsistence of the Huron nation. Further, corn was the most important trade commodity of the Hurons. The tremendous contributions of women to Huronia's well-being

and economy granted women a relatively powerful position in Huron society. Huron women held a great deal of political power. Women participated directly in the political process by attending general councils, addressing assemblies, and maintaining the council fire. Indirectly, women determined the successors to political office. The matrilineal and matrilocal practices of Huron society stemmed from women's contribution to food production. Because Huron society was matrilineal, women indirectly controlled not only political succession, but also housing location and size. The matrilocal practices of Huron society allowed women to threaten men with expulsion from their homes and ostracism by their clans if the men did not accede to the demands of their wives or mothers.

According to Huron mythology, women were responsible for all life and all death. The roles of women in Huron society reflected the mythic perception of women's power. One of the most important roles Huron women could achieve was that of mother. As mother, Huron women created and sustained life. However, women also became wives, shamans, unofficial healers, and participants in funeral rites. Each role that Huron women held reflected and perpetuated women's responsibility for life and death.

Epidemic disease and death severely challenged women's ability to fulfill their traditional roles. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, there were few diseases in Huronia. Contagious disease was rare, and possibly completely absent. Physically and culturally, the Hurons were unable to cope with epidemic disease. The physical toll exacted by contagious disease was devastating. The Hurons lost at least half their population to introduced diseases. Additionally, epidemic outbreaks were accompanied by widespread physical suffering and famine. While all Hurons suffered in the

epidemics, women encountered physical hardships that men did not. For example, women's fertility and ability to breast-feed diminished in the face of epidemic disease and famine. Further, prenatal and perinatal death increased dramatically as a result of physical illness and hunger. Pregnant women were more likely to die of some contagious diseases than non-pregnant women or men. Physically, epidemic disease and death were devastating for Huron women.

The epidemics that swept through Huronia in the 1630s and 1640s also had a tremendous impact on Huron society and culture. As with the physical consequences of contagious disease, the social and cultural consequences were different for men and women. For example, contagious disease affected the participation of women in Huronia's political structure. The extensive kinship ties that allowed women to control political succession were destroyed in the wake of epidemic disease. Sometimes the only men who survived outbreaks of contagious disease were unsuitable and inexperienced leaders. Political issues were neglected during outbreaks of epidemic disease. Finally, the Five Nations instituted an aggressive policy of warfare in the aftermath of the epidemics. The primary goal of the Five Nations was the repopulation of Iroquoia, which had lost thousands of people to contagious disease during the 1630s and 1640s. Women were especially prized as captives by Five Nations warriors. Not only did female captives offer an immediate replacement for deceased Five Nations people, but their fecundity ensured the propagation of the Five Nations. As a result, hundreds of Huron women were taken captive by the Five Nations during the 1640s. Other hardships accompanied warfare with the Five Nations. Famine was rampant during times of war. Additionally, the large numbers of Huron

men who joined raiding parties, as well as the hundreds of men who died in battle, left Huronia without sufficient defense, and Huron women more vulnerable to Five Nations raids.

Epidemic disease and death also carried negative economic consequences for Huron women. Primarily, the workload of individual Huron women increased dramatically in the aftermath of the epidemics. As well, Huron women were also affected by the increasing reliance of Huronia on French trade foods and Jesuit charity. Once Huron women were unable to fulfill their traditional obligations as sustainers of life, the Jesuits usurped that role. Because the traditional power of Huron women stemmed from their control of the food supply, the increased reliance on Europeans for survival cost Huron women some of their power and prestige.

Epidemic disease and death also had a negative cultural impact on Huron women. Rampant disease and famine left Huron women incapable of fulfilling their traditional roles of mothers, wives, shamans, unofficial healers, and participants in funeral rites. Further, the inability of traditional Huron beliefs to cope with the introduced diseases allowed a new belief system, Christianity, to gain ground. Although Huron women were reluctant to accept Christianity, increasingly large numbers of Hurons converted throughout the 1630s and 1640s. Traditional Christian belief considered women inferior to, and subject to the rule of, men. Additionally, the strict moral code of Christianity was in direct contrast with the sexual freedom in Huronia. As well, the single nuclear family units created by Christian marriages deprived women of traditional sources of economic support. Huron women who whole-heartedly embraced the Christian doctrine must have witnessed a tremendous decrease in their traditional power and

prestige. However, prior to 1649, few Hurons accepted every facet of Christian belief. Instead, the Hurons selected and adapted those aspects of Christianity that best suited them.

In March 1649, the Five Nations launched an assault against the Huron villages of Taenhatentaron, St. Louis, and Saint-Marie. At the time of the attacks, Huronia was in deep discord. Epidemic disease and death, warfare with the Five Nations, and the strife between Christian and non-Christian Hurons made Huronia internally weak and vulnerable. As a result, the attacks of March 1649 caused the dispersal of the Huron Confederacy. Following the dispersal, some Hurons joined nations such as the Neutrals, the Petuns, and the Algonquians. Others joined, either by choice or force, the Five Nations. Hundreds of Hurons stayed with the Jesuits, following the priests to Gahoendoe, and later to Quebec. In exile, some Huron women retained much of their traditional power and prestige; other Huron women lost it all. It must be remembered, however, that epidemic disease did not claim only the power and prestige of Huron women. Thousands of Huron women lost their health, their ability to bear and sustain children, their loved ones, and their homeland in the aftermath of the epidemics. As well, several thousand Huron women lost their lives.

The physical hardships which accompanied epidemic disease were devastating to Huron society. In response to the epidemics, several aspects of Huron society and culture were forced to change. One of the changes that took place in the wake of epidemic disease was the erosion of the traditional rights of Huron women. Prior to 1649, Huron women faced several challenges to their power, including the dissolution of kinship ties, which ultimately decreased the political power available to Huron women. After

1649, some Huron women were forced to join nations which did not support their egalitarian status. Other Huron women joined groups, such as the Five Nations, which supported powerful and prestigious women. However, among the Five Nations, captives who were not integrated by intermarriage were not offered traditional rights. As a result, Huron women among the Five Nations were not immediately allowed to exercise their traditional rights.

The loss of traditional power and prestige among Huron women may be attributed to several factors. Christianity undermined the power of Huron women. Warfare dispersed the Huron Confederacy, leaving Huron women without a cultural buttress for their traditional power. However, both Christianity and warfare were by-products of epidemic disease. Christianity gained ground in Huronia only after thousands of Hurons died from the epidemics, and only when traditional beliefs were not adequate to cope with contagious disease and death. Likewise, warfare stemmed from the tremendous loss of life suffered in Iroquoia. Contagious disease directly caused the loss of Huron women's power and prestige by dissolving traditional kinship ties, by decreasing the amount of labour women were able to contribute to the Huron economy, and by increasing the Hurons' reliance on French trade goods and charity. The underlying cause of the upheaval in Huron society was epidemic disease. In the end, it was contagious disease which cost Huron women their homeland, their loved ones, their power and prestige, and their lives.

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